



How did WW1 change the way we treat war injuries today?

What was it like inside a WW1 hospital?

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Video transcript

Working in a World War One hospital was not for the faint hearted.

By January 1915, British medical authorities had realised that too many wounded soldiers were dying before they could reach proper treatment.

Casualty clearing stations had seen emergency surgery since the start of the war. Within months they were to become more akin to field hospitals.

Surgeons and military nurses were now operating in tented trauma centres, frequently within earshot of the fighting.

Sir Henry Souttar, a distinguished surgeon, described the situation he encountered setting up his hospital in a Belgian town.

“We had no knives, and no artery forceps, and not a stitch of catgut. Some Belgian doctors who had been working there lent us a little case of elementary instruments, and that was absolutely all we had.”

“In four days we admitted three hundred and fifty patients, all of them with injuries of the most terrible nature. Arms and legs were torn right off or hanging by the merest shreds, ghastly wounds of the head left the brain exposed. For four days and four nights the operating theatre was at work continuously, till one sickened at the sight of blood.”

While surgeons in military hospitals could expect to operate in better conditions than those in volunteer hospitals such as Souttar’s, they remained significantly under-resourced.

Even in the large hospitals further behind the frontline, there was little respite. A typical base hospital housed approximately 300 staff.

From 1917, these medical staff could be tasked with caring for as many as 2,500 patients at any one time.

Archive stills and footage courtesy of Mary Evans, Getty and TopFoto