

Surgeon's Report

(ADM 101/15 (AOT Reel 3191))

Cadet (3), Surgeon Superintendent John C Bowman

GENERAL REMARKS

The Female Prisoners to the number of 150, with about 30 children, were embarked at Woolwich on the 3rd and 4th of November 1848. At that time they were in good health, but a few cases of cholera had occurred in Milbank Penitentiary on the Male side, though none has as yet appeared amongst the Females. Cholera also at that time was prevalent on Board the Hulks near which the Cadet was moored at Woolwich. Whilst at Woolwich diarrhoea frequently occurred amongst the Prisoners but it was not of a nature to create any alarm and I at that attributed it to change of diet; the cases did not require to be put on the Sick List and were removed by a dose of Rhubarb & Blue Pill or other appropriate remedy. We left Woolwich on the 12th of November & experienced very severe weather in the Channel, and on the 20th of the same month I desired the Master to bear up for Plymouth, the Prisoners being very exhausted from constant Sea Sickness & some slight cases of Synochus Fever having appeared, & also there not appearing any prospect of the vessel making any progress in her voyage. Immediately on the vessel's anchoring a beneficial change took place in the health of the convicts, and on the 21st I went on shore to report the ship to the Admiral & obtain supplies of fresh beef & vegetables and a gale of wind having set in I was that night unable to return on board. The next morning at 7 I succeeded in reaching the ship & found that during the previous night a woman had been attacked with malignant Cholera, the symptoms were undoubted, & it appeared hopeless from the first. The case is given in No.1 of this Journal.

On the 23rd November another case occurred of a very peculiar nature viz Cholera & delivery of a child during the collapsed state, and this case would in all probability not have proved fatal but for these strange combination of circumstances. I have given the case in No.2. At this same period there were numerous cases of Diarrhoea & some of Choleric or Choleraic Diarrhoea, two of the latter cases I have detailed in Nos 4 & 13 and a case of severe Diarrhoea No.10.

I was very careful in all these cases, in classing those only as malignant Cholera, in which I considered the Ejecta to consist of the

serum of the blood. If this symptom were absent I called the Cholera or Diarrhoea according to its severity. Were all other Practitioners equally guarded perhaps we should hear less of their cures of actual Cholera and less of nonsensical remedies, cried up as specifics.

Towards the end of November the Convicts were getting in a more healthy state when another case of true Cholera occurred, in the person of one of the sick attendants. This woman undoubtedly recovered from the disease but died of the subsequent reactive fever, not withstanding early & vigorous treatment, her case is related in No.6.

During the prevalence of the Cholera, the utmost care was taken to keep the ship dry by means of constant airing, stoves and the repeated use of the Burnett Solution, of the Chloride of Zinc, to the closets, hospital and every other practicable part of the ship. Having at the time expressed my opinion to Sir W Burnett of the great value of his invention I need not here repeat it. I used the solution, not only on account of its great & undoubted purifying powers but also as a precautionary measure on account of its disinfecting ones also. Although I do not believe in any absolute infection in Cholera.

With regard to the treatment of Malignant Cholera (which term I prefer to Asiatic, the latter making a geographical disease of it) my experience fortunately was too limited to enable me to offer any very decided opinion. I should rather prefer the effervescing draughts, to allay thirst & check vomiting, with calomel to restore the secretions more especially of the liver. Of chloroform I can undoubtedly speak well as exemplified in case No.2 in which not a single cramp followed its second application and it also proved of great use after in the extraction of the placenta. Of course, the Diarrhoea that occurred during this time were treated on general medical principles.

Whilst remaining at Plymouth 3 other deaths occurred, one that of an infant from Tabes requiring no mention, another that of Ann Holt a very weak woman who died of some obscure disease of heart & general debility, her stamina not being sufficient to stand her late hardships, for I ought to here mentioned that during the month we were in Plymouth Sound, it was almost one incessant rain accompanied by heavy gales of wind.

The remaining case of death was that of Ann Wheatcroft from mental disease. It may be remembered that I applied in vain for this woman's removal, my application being supported by the Director General of

the Medical Department of the Navy, but the Secretary of State refused it; her case is given in the Journal in No.3.

The Cadet proceeded to sea on the 17th of December, & again the unfortunate vessel experienced heavy head gales, the very debilitated woman afflicted with a Phthisical or Bronchitic disease did not long survive, case No.7, and a boy No.8 case also contracted Typhus Fever & soon was carried off, fortunately this proved a solitary case.

Shortly after getting to sea, I observed symptoms of Psora¹ and on minutely inspecting the convicts I singled out such as were afflicted and soon got rid of this nuisance.

On getting into the Tropics, many cases of Synochus Bilious Fever broke out, somewhat then, such as cases Nos 9, 14, 15, 17, 18 and 21. Between this and the arrival at Hobart Town, one other death occurred. The woman was put on the Sick List with chronic Ophthalmia which from her own folly, subsequently became aggravated & she was afflicted with ulcer of the cornea, from this complaint she was fast recovering, but suddenly & most unexpectedly expired. Her case is detailed in No.26. I think from her miserable & obstinate disposition that she laboured always under a chronic meningitis & perhaps the inflammation and irritation of the eye insidiously aggravated an already over excited organisation.

On arriving at Hobart Town it was found necessary to send 2 patients to the Colonial Hospital, one with severely scalded legs, another a woman who had been constantly under treatment and was afflicted with general debility & diarrhoea.

The expenditure of medicine has been rather large, but it must be recalled too that at times nearly every woman in the ship was under treatment, though not actually on the Sick List. I vaccinated & revaccinated all the infants whose mothers would permit it, till the vaccine matter was exhausted, but as every case, though performed with the greatest care, proved unsuccessful, I have not given a detailed account of them.

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¹ A cutaneous disease, especially the itch.