

Military Rehabilitation during the Great War in Belgium

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The beginning of the 20th century meant also the beginning of the evolution from rehabilitation-empirism to rehabilitation sciences. It was not different for medicine. For the numerous wounded soldiers of WW1, healthcare providers were lacking. On the other side, the mechanistic image of the world was trending. Everything could be solved with mechanic machines. For the rehabilitation of patients, complex machines were invented and build to replace physiotherapists and nurses. Electrotherapy and thermotherapy were therefore also quite popular those days.

In the early beginning of the war, there were few resources to provide rehabilitation to the soldiers. The Belgian armed forces quickly had a first rehabilitation centre in Rouen (North of France) called 'Hôpital Anglo-Belge Roi Albert 1er' and moved in 1916 to Bonsecours. Other centres were built near Le Havre and in Port-Villez-les-Vernon ('Dépôts des invalides'). In those centres not only rehabilitation was provided but also new occupations and jobs were taught as Society would need all men and women to rise from its ashes after the War. Another philosophy was held by the hospital "Ocean" which was close to the frontline to send back to the frontline as many soldiers as possible and to keep the rehabilitation process as short as possible.

Innovations and technological progress are characteristics of military medicine. During WW1, there was an improvement in prosthetics, news rehabilitation equipment and techniques were implemented. But implementing functional occupational rehabilitation might be one of the most striking evolutions which was not also important to society but also to the individual wounded soldier who could find psychosocial support and motivation by being useful in the reconstruction of the country in the post-war era.

Today we can observe the same philosophy during the recent wars and conflicts. Looking back on how our ancestors dealt with the consequences of this world wide disaster, can provide us some valuable lessons for the future.