



ENQUIRY 12

How effective was medical care on the Western Front in the First World War?

Key Stage 4

ENQUIRY OVERVIEW

This enquiry examines how effective medical care was on the Western Front in the First World War. The principal focus will be on looking at medical care by the British Army. The enquiry will look at a range of sources and encourage students to evaluate their impact before reaching a judgement as to the effectiveness of medical care on the Western Front.

The enquiry could be used by teachers in conjunction with parts of the new Edexcel GCSE history specification (*Paper 1: Thematic study and historic environment, Option 11: Medicine in Britain, c1250–present*. In this option is a linked study of the historic environment entitled *The British sector of the Western Front, 1914–18: injuries, treatment and the trenches*).

Students start by considering the types of wounds, injuries and medical issues which were common on the Western Front. This information is then set in the wider context of how the wounds were treated and who treated them. The effectiveness of these methods is then assessed. Further tasks then look at what happened when a soldier was wounded and ultimately will ask the students to reach a judgement on how effective medical treatment was on the Western Front.

Students will look at a wide range of sources of evidence, including posters, statistics, photographs and secondary accounts. The end product will be a written answer in response to the enquiry question.

NOTE: There are plentiful materials on most aspects of the medicine in the First World War. The lessons which follow suggest some issues and pathways to investigate, with some examples of supporting resources, but alternatives are easily available and could be covered. The purpose of this enquiry is to give an overview of the issues and to assess the effectiveness of medical care on the Western Front.



There is also useful advice on teaching the new GCSE course here -

<http://www.thinkinghistory.co.uk/ResourceBase/GrandfatherandMedicine.html>

There will also guidance as to how to relate each section to the visible evidence of the battlefield sites of the Western Front. These will be referred to in the lessons below, with examples of activities that could be used on a battlefield site or at a [Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#) cemetery or memorial.

There are opportunities through this topic to make links to English (e.g. developing speaking and listening skills, inferring meaning from text, writing imaginatively, creatively and thoughtfully), and citizenship (e.g. looking at the actions individuals, groups and organisations can take to influence and provoke popular opinion) and geography (e.g. interactions between people and their environments, the location of places and environments).



Lessons

STAGE 1 How challenging was war on the Western Front for the medical services?

Start with the quote from Captain G Keynes, (Presentation 1). What do students think were the main challenges facing the medical services on the Western Front? Get them to discuss the quote and what they can learn from it in pairs. What were the main challenges for the medical services on the Western Front? This can be done as a think, pair, share exercise.

Next, use the summary about wounds on the Western Front (presentation 1 – slide 2). Get students to read through the information and consider the different types of wounds and injuries medics had to deal with on the Western Front. Students should make notes while doing so, in the form of a spider-diagram, recording all the different issues they can find. Once they have done this, ask the students to rank the issues from highest to lowest risk, i.e. the most to least dangerous. In pairs or small groups, students should then discuss their rankings and come to a consensus as to the biggest issues for medics. For each of the top 3 points they decide on, they should be able to justify each one. This can be done as a verbal or written activity.

The next activity will ask students to consider two of the ‘new’ medical issues faced by medics on the Western Front – Gas and trench conditions firstly, looking at gas, students should look at the three sources (slides 3-5) and then consider the following question;

1. What can they learn from each of the sources about gas warfare and how medics treated it on the Western Front?
2. In what ways do the sources agree and disagree with each other?
3. Which of the sources is most useful for understanding the issues caused by the use of gas in the First World War?

Students now need to look at medical issues associated with trench warfare – trench foot and sanitation (slides 6-7). Firstly they should read each source and think about what the major issues for the medics were. Having completed this, they should then come up with two to three additional questions they want to ask about the sources, e.g. how was trench foot treated;

To sum up this section, students should return to the original question - How challenging was war on the Western Front for the medical services?

To reach a judgement on this, students should draw a judgement line;

Challenging -----Easy

They should mark a point on this line which they think best sums up their view and then come up with 3 points of evidence which prove their point. This can be done either with bullet-points, or by encouraging the students to write a paragraph in response to the question.



STAGE 1 (cont...)

Guidance to assessing this question when visiting battlefield sites of the Western Front.

Much of the former Western Front is still agricultural land as it was prior to the First World War. At many points you can pause and get the students to consider the issues that fighting on this ground had i.e. use of manure etc. At other times of the year, especially in Flanders it is possible to see how wet the ground is, and therefore, consider the issues that fighting in such conditions would bring. If you are wishing to study the use of gas on the Western Front, a much-used location for this is at the Canadian Memorial at Vancouver Corner at St Julian, near Ypres, which is very close to the very first gas attack on the Western Front in 1915. Another suitable location is at Langemark German Cemetery, where a recently constructed sign-post reminds visitors that gas was first used nearby in 1915 and also points out other locations where it has been used, up to the present day.

List of resources, worksheets, video clips and interactive activities for use with Stage 1

Medicine Presentation 1

Medicine Resource 1



Lessons

STAGE 2 Who treated the injured on the Western Front?

This stage develops students' understanding of who treated the wounded on the Western Front. It looks at a range of organisations both military and civilian, including the RAMC and the FANY.

Start by looking at the two recruitment posters (Presentation 2 – slide 1). Students should work in pairs to complete a starter activity in the form of the 'Brainbox' style. Firstly students should take one poster each and come up with at least 5 questions about it, such as 'how many of the women are wearing armbands?', or 'how many different roles are listed in the RAMC poster? Then students have 1 minute to study the other poster before the other student asks them the questions they came up with about it.

To follow up students should then consider these two questions (slide 2);

- i) What do these posters suggest about the medical services in the First World War?
- ii) What does the VAD poster suggest about the role of women in the First World War?

The next slides (3-6) look at four different organisations which administered medical care on the Western Front. Looking at the RAMC (slide 3), students should compare the sources. Get them to start by noting the key information in each source and then move on to look at similarities and differences. Once complete, students should consider which source is most useful to finding out about the role of RAMC on the Western Front.

Slides 4, 5 and 6 all look at the female-dominated medical organisations, the QAIMNS, the VAD and the FANY. Students should look at each slide and record what they can learn about the role of each organisation. Then students should study the slide on the VAD (slide 5) and consider how the two sources can be used together to explain the work of the VAD. Finally, student should look at the role of the FANY – first look at the picture and consider what they can learn from it about the role of the FANY and is the picture on its own useful. Next they should use the source on slide 7 to explain how it supports and add to what they could see in the image by assessing what it confirms and what is new information.

To sum up, students should create key word summaries about each organisation using no more than 10 words each time to sum up the role of each organisation.

Guidance to assessing this question when visiting battlefield sites of the Western Front.

One way to look at the roles of different medical organisations on the Western Front is through some of the individuals who served with them. The following sites allow you to tell the story of some of those who served. You could visit the grave of Captain Noel Chavasse VC*, MC at [Brandhoek New Military Cemetery](#) near Ypres to look at the role he played as an RAMC doctor. At [Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery](#), visitors can find the grave of Staff Nurse Nellie Spindler QAIMNS(R) and therefore look at the role of military nurses on the Western Front.



STAGE 2 (cont...)

List of resources, worksheets, video clips and interactive activities for use with Stage 2

Medicine Presentation 2



Lessons

STAGE 3 What happened to a soldier when he was wounded?

This stage will focus on looking at the medical evacuation chain, looking at each stage and how patients were transported between them.

Start by getting students to read the source on slide 1. They should individually consider what they can learn from the source and then in pairs, discuss what the source suggests about medical evacuation on the Western Front. Students should then come up with at least three questions which they would ask about the sources which would help them find out more about the medical evacuation process.

The remaining slides in the presentation should be printed off prior to the lesson. These will form the basis of the next activity. You will also note that the slides are colour coded with a cross. This allows the sources to be grouped together. There are six different colours/groups;

Blue – Stretcher Bearers

Red – Regimental Aid Post

Green – Field Ambulance

Orange – Casualty Clearing Station

Black – Transportation

Purple – Base Hospitals

To begin, each student should be given a picture source. They should then work on their own to identify the main features of the source and what they can learn from it about this part of the evacuation process. Once complete, the students will need to get into a group of 3, based in the colour on their sources, i.e. all the blues etc. As a group they should compare each of the images and identify the similarities and differences between them. Once complete, they should create a summary about their element of the evacuation chain. To follow on from this, hand out the written sources (in the relevant colour) and ask students to add to their summary from the written sources. To conclude this part of the activity, students should sum up the main features of their part of the evacuation chain in no more than five pieces of information.

For the next stage, the class will need to get into groups of six – one from each colour. Each student should take their original picture source with them and explain the key features to the new group. Once each individual has described their element, the group should try to put the images/parts into the correct order. Once correct, student should look to make notes in the form of flow-diagram to explain the key features of medical evacuation process. (a template is available – see [Medicine Resource 2](#)). *NB Students should be made aware that once a soldier reached the Regimental Aid Post, he could be returned to his unit from any point in the evacuation chain, as long as he was fit to do so. A soldier was only evacuated to the next stage if he required further treatment, care or recuperation.*

Finally they should consider how effective the medical evacuation process was on the Western Front. Students should discuss this question in their groups. They should aim to reach a consensus and agree on three pieces of evidence which they will use to prove their judgment. This can then form the basis of a class discussion, or a written response.



STAGE 3 (cont...)

Guidance to assessing this question when visiting battlefield sites of the Western Front.

A visit to the former battlefields around Ypres can enable students to explore the nature of the medical evacuation process on the Western Front. A visit to the recreated trenches at the Memorial Museum Passchendaele can be used to look at the initial treatment of a casualty, the role of the stretcher bearers and the Regimental Aid Post. Many of the cemeteries of the **Commonwealth War Graves Commission** have connections with the medical evacuation process. A visit to [Tyne Cot Cemetery](#) can then be used to show students the location of an actual RAP, which in 1917 was situated in the concrete pillbox which today is beneath the Cross of Sacrifice. Moving on in the process, a visit to [Essex Farm Cemetery](#) will allow students to consider the location and role of the Advanced Dressing Station, before visiting [Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery](#) – and its excellent visitor centre – to look at the Casualty Clearing Station. Much further afield, visits can be made to Base Hospital sites, and the associated cemeteries on the coast at [Etaples](#) or [Wimereux](#).

List of resources, worksheets, video clips and interactive activities for use with Stage 3

Medicine Presentation 3

Medicine Resource 2



Lessons

STAGE 4 How effective was medical treatment on the Western Front?

The stage will encourage students to consider how effective medical treatment was on the Western Front and also to look at the legacy of the changes which took place.

Students need to start by evaluating the data in the table in slide 1. They could be asked to use their numeracy skills to convert the figures into percentages. Once done, they need to consider what the data suggests about how effective medical treatment on the Western Front was? They should look to identify at least three pieces of evidence to prove it was effective/not effective etc. Once this is done, they can then look at the source on slide 2 and consider to what extent this supports or challenges the judgement they have just reached and the reasons why.

Students are now going to look at some of the medical advancements made during the First World War, and identify different ways in which treatment was developed during the war. Students should work through each of the sources and record the nature of the advancement. Once they have reviewed each source, they should then rank the advancement and be able to justify their chosen order. This can then be discussed in pairs and then in groups.

To conclude this unit, students should then do a 5-3-1 task. Encourage them to record their own top five ways in terms of how effective medical treatment was on the Western Front. Each student should be expected to be able to prove why these five are the most significant. They should then share these with a partner and justify why they have chosen these. After discussing with their partner their own choices, they should then remove two of them, leaving them with three. Swap to another partner and repeat this task. This time, following the discussions, they should decide what the most significant feature of medical treatment was, and come up with three reasons which prove it! This can then form the basis for either a written answer in response to this enquiry or for a class discussion.

List of resources, worksheets, video clips and interactive activities for use with Stage 4

Medicine Presentation 4



Resources

On the following pages are the following worksheet resources to support the enquiry;

Stage 1 – Medicine Resource 1: **Injuries sustained by British soldiers in the First World War**

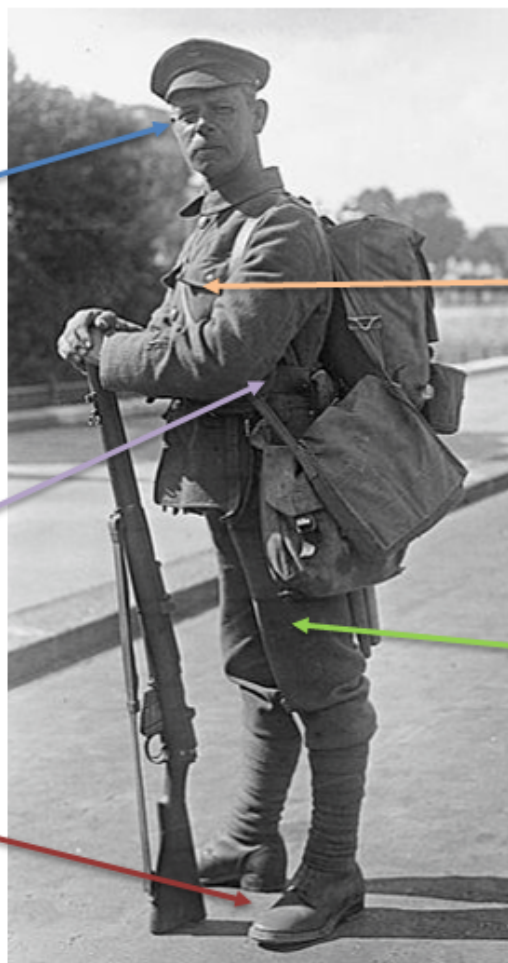
Stage 3 - Medicine Resource 2: Template for recording details of the medical evacuation process on the Western Front.



The British Army went to war wearing soft caps and there were a lot of head injuries. As a result, steel helmets were introduced in late 1915. Interestingly, this led to an increase in the number of head injuries (16% of all wounds) because more men survived their head wounds because they were now wearing a helmet!

Lice affected all soldiers in the trenches. They lived in the seams of the men's clothes and were almost impossible to remove. As well as being irritating, they could also cause trench fever, which had flu-like symptoms.

Trench foot was a very real problem especially over the winter of 1914-15. Standing in cold mud and water in tight army boots caused the foot to swell. The skin also began to shrivel and in the worst cases, to rot and to die!



Less than 12% of all wounds were to the chest, stomach or back. This is because most soldiers who were wounded in this area died before reaching medical care. For those who did make it, special Casualty Clearing Stations were set up close to the front to deal with these dangerous wounds.

Wounds to the arms and legs were the most common injuries, making up 67% of all wounds. These were caused by exploding shells, although these were often recorded as 'G.S.W.' – gun shot wounds on a soldier's papers. The wounds were a result of shrapnel or shell fragments and in the worst cases would lead to amputation.



Medical evacuation on the Western Front

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graph TD; A[ ] --> B[ ]; B --> C[ ]; C --> D[ ]; D --> E[ ]; E --> F[ ]
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