



Why July 1916 was an important month for professional women

by Katrina Kirkwood

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When I set out to trace exactly what my grandmother, Dr Isabella Stenhouse, had done in WW1, one document particularly intrigued me: her offer to serve with the British Army. This seemed to make little sense because, so far as I knew, the army had, with one exception^[i], refused to work with any of the many women doctors eager to do their patriotic duty.

This had left medical women with a conundrum. Either they stayed in civilian work, taking up the slack left by male colleagues departing for war, or they joined an independent hospital in France or Serbia and treated the wounded of Britain's allies. Isabella chose the latter and served in the Anglo-Ethiopian Hospital in France.

However, as the war dragged on, the army's need for doctors grew. Not only did the battle zones demand a constant supply, but many of the casualties required medical treatment that lasted for months or years. How was the military imperative to be met without threatening the health needs of the civilian population - the miners and factory workers whose work was vital if the war was to be won?

In December 1915 the Scottish Medical Service Emergency Committee^[ii] attempted to find out where each doctor was working and what help each one was prepared to offer. 3397 doctors replied to the questionnaire. Isabella, one of only fourteen women among 527 doctors listed in the Edinburgh area, volunteered herself for 'Group B (45 to 55) Part-time home military work.' She was only 28, but what would have been the point of offering 'Group A (under 45) Lieut. RAMC' when there was no chance of the army taking her on?

When conscription was introduced in spring 1916, the medical profession was a reserved occupation but, in June, the Director General Army Medical Services, Lt-General Sir Alfred Keogh called for, '... the mobilization of the whole of the medical services of this country for its civil needs on such lines as shall enable the pressing requirements of the Army to be met with the least possible injury to the civilian population.'

A journalist commented that '[Sir Alfred's] scheme ... is calculated to bring into the fold of national service every medical man who has the interests of his country at heart.'^[iii] He had perhaps not heard of Sir Alfred's other plan. The Director General and his advisors had been observing the professionalism and skill of medical women across the war zone and they had changed their minds: it was time to enlist the help of the medical women. A letter was sent to every woman on the medical register.

Long afterwards, Dr Letitia Fairfield remembered, 'In 1916 came a sudden and urgent appeal from the War Office for medical women to serve in Malta, Egypt, and in military hospitals at home. The reason (which had to be secret) for this reversal of policy was a demand for a large reserve of doctors to supply contemplated campaigns in the Mediterranean, at a moment when doctors were already extremely scarce.'

The War Office's about-turn at last gave Isabella and her fellow women doctors a chance to use their professional skills for their own countrymen. Yet, the men in charge of the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) were cautious. Despite working with thousands of nurses, their views as to the capabilities of women were fixed. They were certain, for example, that women doctors were unsuited to working in any spot that might come under fire. They were confident that medical women could never command a company because of the reluctance of the men to serve under women. Their solution was threefold:

- They sent the women to Malta, which was busy, but where there was little risk of fighting.
- They refused them the right to wear the uniform and badges of the RAMC.
- They denied them the temporary commissions automatically given to volunteering male doctors.

These conditions of service ignored the fact that the Boer War had proved it was impossible for volunteering male doctors to function properly within the RAMC without uniform and commissioned rank. The women apparently considered the conditions so 'deplorable' that they 'only accepted ... them on the grounds of grave national emergency.'^[v]

Isabella signed up on 24th July 1916. On 12th August she set sail for Malta with fifteen other medical women^[vi] - Scottish, Irish, English, a New Zealander, a woman from India, suffragists, old hands, young doctors who had worked in France and Serbia, one who had been imprisoned in Serbia and another who had been awarded a medal. All were ready not only to help win the war but also to make the most of this chance to prove they were as good as the men - it was one more opportunity to break down the barriers they faced as professional women.

^[i]Geddes, J.F.(2006). *The Women's Hospital Corps: forgotten surgeons of the First World War*. J Med Biogr.14(2):109-17.

^[ii][Index of Doctors in Scotland During The First World War | Index to Doctors in Scotland during the First World War](#)

^[iii] Medical Mobilization. (FROM OUR MEDICAL CORRESPONDENT.). The Times (London, England), Tuesday, Jun 13, 1916; pg. 3; Issue 41192.

[iv] Fairfield, Let. al. *Medical Women in the Forces*. JMWF, 49, 1967, p.99

[v] Fairfield et al, *ibid*.

[vi] [Stenhouse Isabella](#)- Lady doctors of the Malta Garrison

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