The truth from the trenches

In this three part series Dental Tribune’s Laura Hatton explores the forgotten history of the dentist’s role during World War I

The beginning of this re-search began with a remarkable conversa-
tion with a gentleman named Richard Fowler, who enlight-
ened me about a close family friend and a noteworthy dentist, Sir Harry Baldwin. Being the godson of Sir Harry Baldwin’s only child, Mary Baldwin, Rich-
ard was able to reveal the intriguing story of Sir Harry, which captured my imagina-
tion. Born in 1862 into a family of drapers in Nottingham, Harry developed a passion for dentis-
try and after qualifying in 1884 he became acquainted with Sir Charles Tomes, and worked alongside him at the Cavendish Square Practice for many years. In 1915 Harry became President of the Metropolitan Branch of the British Dental Association (BDA), and in 1915 was ap-
pointed President of the Section of Ondontology. Harry’s later life was intertwined with vari-
ous connections to the Royal Family, becoming dentist and surgeon dentist to Queen Victo-
ria and King George V, as well as with some of the most extensive jaw cases of the Great War.

As Harry walked through the room hundreds of soldiers lay before him; many of these men, some barely old enough to be enlisted, had exten-
sive loss of tissue in the lower part of their face. Harry spent the morning observing and documenting the degree of shrapnel damage that had ma-
damaged and disfigured the sol-
diers, noting how all the cases had been incurred at high velocity. “The effect of these impacts”, Harry ex-
plained, “is to comminute the bone and generally destroy or completely carry away some sector of it. Pieces detached, and likewise teeth, frequently have so great a proportion of the mo-
termed bone and the bullet imparted to them that they themselves act like projectiles and tear through the soft tissues in a radiating manner, inflicting very large flesh wounds.”

Harry devised how such in-
juries could be classified into six sections or types, determining the true extent of the damage and teeth embedment; Type 6 were single fractures with ver-
 {...}
In the beginning

It became obvious to Harry that hospitals such as this were a necessity to the survival of soldiers during the war and on querying the situation further he was invited to read the hospital’s first annual report. The Hospital Service de Stomatologic de Lyon begun in September 1914 as an ambulance of 50 beds, which was in the presence of a school and strictly reserved for wounded men that it would not be impossible to create them; he went on to confirm that Harry’s concerns would be pressed upon Surgeon-General Russel at the War Office, as he was the man “who was really responsible for dental and jaw treatment in the Army.” Mr Bennet further mentioned how a French correspondent had declared that the majority of the dental profession in France was to be utilised in dental work for the Army. For Harry this information was invaluable and was soon to become the backbone of his campaign.

Rewriting history
On his return to Britain Harry had come equipped with enough evidence to launch an appeal to create stomatological hospitals in every district in Britain. His message amplified how such hospitals offered a chance for those soldiers who had become mutilated wrecks to return to society as men presentable and happy, and not as objects of horror and commiseration.

In one of his earliest speeches on his return, Harry related how the failure to create a stomatological service early in the war had resulted in soldiers coming back to the hospital, with their mouths sewn up and distorted; many of them had

antly the point of the chin, the other a fragment about an inch wide through the whole... of the jaw and containing two teeth – one wisdom tooth – there Dr Pont said, unfortunately were dead – the soft tissues were then divided by completely splitting up the sinus, which was under the chin, and a clay of kind was soaked in — of iodine and packed into it. Bandages were then applied to the fracture.

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ambulance of 50 beds, which was located in the presence of a school and strictly reserved for wounds of the face. Scarcely had it been created was it perceived as insufficient to support the number of wounded men that were being sent from the front line. By 1915 the total number of beds had increased by 256; this later increased to 690, with 771 soldiers admitted in November 1915 alone.

The hospital was surrounded by a large garden where the wounded would spend time recovering before being sent to the centre of the Service, Auxiliary Hospital No. 19, where the soldiers would be attended to by dental surgeons.

Between December 1914 to December 1915, 574 splinter extractions were carried out, along with 92 extractions of missiles and 90 plastic operations, not to mention a whole array of operations including the 18,854 extractions, 722 scalings, 5,186, 1,779 plates (artificial teeth), and 25 metal chin caps. There were 947 recorded apparatus for the retention of fragments of jaw, 674 apparatus for the reduction of displacements and 255 apparatus to prevent cicatricial retractions.

Harry realised the momentous role that the hospital was performing and on his return to Britain he began writing letters to various people. His words painted a clear image of what he had seen and on January 15th 1916 Harry received a letter from Norman Bennet stating he accepted the idea of dental hospitals, and that it would not be impossible to create them; he went on to confirm that Harry’s concerns would be pressed upon Surgeon-General Russel at the War Office, as he was the man “who was really responsible for dental and jaw treatment in the Army.” Mr Bennet further mentioned how a French correspondent had declared that the majority of the dental profession in France was to be utilised in dental work for the Army. For Harry this information was invaluable and was soon to become the backbone of his campaign.

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difficulty speaking, and there were numerous fractured jaws. He confidently stated in several of his speeches that any form of work on the jaw and face should be undertaken by dentists, and not by doctors. In a lengthy and detailed debate, Harry emphasised on the evidence of surgical failures carried out by doctors, and exclaimed that: “One has seen cases where useful teeth with live pulps have been extracted, whilst septic roots have been allowed to remain. In other instances the soft parts have been sewn up around bony fragments which were still displaced…”

Harry continued voicing his knowledge, sharing his message that if France was doing it then so should Britain:

“I suggest that all is not being done in this country which should be done for soldiers wounded in the jaws and face; and in order to assist matters I also venture to suggest that a Care Committee for soldiers wounded in the jaws and face should be formed, the object of which Committee would be to promote the interests of such cases not only whilst still in the Army, but also after their discharge.”

Harry continued his campaign. Aspiring to work the heart strings of compassion by exercising hard felt shock tactics, Harry delivered a presentation of the wounded soldiers; the exhibition was filled with photographs and models of various cases.

Harry's voice had reached the masses and his efforts hadn't gone unnoticed. With the media behind him, Harry's voice had reached the masses and his efforts hadn't gone unnoticed.

On the 10th April 1916, after much communication between Harry, the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St John of Jerusalem in England, Parliament and the Joint War Committee, King George V personally granted permission for Harry Baldwin and his fellow dentist, Dr Herm, to visit the military hospitals in France with provisions and services to be provided at their every need. Orders were written to the dental surgeons of maxilla facial hospitals.

Harry argued his case and articulated his passion and determination into words of reason; what followed was a dedicated committee and an influx of maxilla facial hospitals.

A place in history

In 1918 Harry, along with many of the dental surgeons and dentists that treated thousands of wounded soldiers, was knighted for his services during the war.

It may be hard to truly imagine the haunting images that were set before Harry's eyes throughout his time spent in the military hospitals of France and Britain; however, having read a selection of cases documented by Sir Harold Gilhies, (the doctor who pioneered plastic surgery), it becomes apparent that the strength each dental surgeon mustered from within during the Great War was an incredible accomplishment and deserves, without a shadow of a doubt, the utmost respect and honour, and a recognised place in history.

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General commanding the line of communications in France and on 18th April 1916 the request was accepted. Travelling on board the Special Service Cross Channel Boats they travelled across the channel, with no incidents, no bombs and no mines to report. Harry's post was to study the conditions under which jaw cases were being treated and how methods were adopted; the information brought back to the King would change the way Britain saw dentistry forever.

Although Harry's diary is still currently being transcribed, what can be devised from his notes is that Harry continued visiting the hospitals in France, taking notes and recording treatments and cases in his diary. His sketches dictate the level of expertise and science that captivated the dentists of the time; pages upon pages of Harry's diary are dedicated to drawings of the equipment used, sketches of clamps and hinges that attached jaws back together, case studies of jaws with chunks of bone missing, teeth askew and fractured jaws, all of which were accompanied by an idea of treatment.

Alleviating pressures

As a final act of his campaign, Harry wrote to Mr Goschen on the 20th November 1815 regarding the outlook of one of the hospitals in France. In his letter Harry described the insufficient flow of men being discharged from the front line hospitals and proposed the idea of freeing up the military hospitals on the front line by sending soldiers to specialist dental military hospitals.

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