

U. S. SANITARY COMMISSION.

No. 23.

WASHINGTON, July 31st, 1861.

The Committee appointed on the 29th inst., to visit the Military General Hospitals in and around Washington, and to ascertain their condition and the wants of the sick and wounded volunteers, beg to report, that they have visited the following Hospitals, viz. :

1. *The Washington Infirmary, C street ;*
2. *The Union Hotel Hospital, Georgetown ;*
3. *The Seminary Hospital, Georgetown ;*
4. *The Columbia College Hospital ;*
5. *The Alexandria Hospital.*

With the exception of the first named Institution, all of these Hospitals have been hired by the Government and converted to their present uses, furnished and provided with officers and attendants, within the present month. There is also a Hospital on E street, and another at Annapolis, Maryland, which your Committee were unable to visit, and also a Hospital for eruptive and contagious diseases.

The aggregate number of patients in these Hospitals is about 900 ; of whom about 450 are men wounded in the affair of the 21st inst., the remainder comprising medical cases, and those sick in Hospital before the engagement.

The Committee takes pleasure in reporting, in general terms, that the Hospital accommodations in this locality, and at the present time, are extensive, that their officers and attendants

are equal to their duties, and that the sick and wounded are generally doing well. Certain facts which have been observed, and suggestions which have occurred to them, will be stated in connection with each Hospital, in the order in which it was visited.

1. *Infirmary, C Street.*—This building has been in use for a number of years. It is said to be capable of accommodating 180 patients, and at present contains about 100. A number of Sisters of Charity are attached to the Institution, sufficient to attend to the preparation and distribution of food to the sick. The building is defective in many of the particulars deemed essential in the construction of a perfect Hospital at the present day. The ceilings are low; the windows small, and too few in number; the supply of water and accommodations for bathing, and the provision of water-closets are insufficient; and there is no dead house—dead bodies being kept in a lower room within the building until they are buried. The basement is damp—its ceilings low, its wards small, and badly ventilated. Commendable foresight has been exercised in erecting tents suitable for the reception of cases of Fever and Erysipelas on a vacant space in the rear building. The surface of this space, however, is very uneven and imperfectly drained.

2. *The Union Hotel Hospital, Georgetown,* was occupied as its name implies, until recently hired for its present use. It is considered capable of accommodating 225 patients, and at present contains 189. It is well situated, but the building is old, out of repair, and cut up into a number of small rooms, with windows too small and few in number to afford good ventilation. Its halls and passages, are narrow, tortuous, and abrupt, and in many instances with carpets still unremoved from their

floors, and walls covered with paper. There are no provisions for bathing, the water-closets and sinks are insufficient and defective, and there is no dead-house. The wards are many of them overcrowded, and destitute of arrangements for artificial ventilation. The cellars and area are damp and undrained, and much of the wood work is actively decaying.

3. *The Seminary Hospital*, in the immediate vicinity of the last, is much better adapted to Hospital purposes, though it also is defective in water-closets and baths, and its passages and halls are tortuous and narrow, and many of its wards are small, and imperfectly ventilated. There are no arrangements for artificial ventilation, and the number of beds would greatly overcrowd the wards if all were occupied. At the present time, when the warmth justifies the universal opening of windows and doors, the risk of communicable disease is lessened, but during the autumnal changes the absence of facilities for artificial ventilation will be productive of serious disease. Its wards at present contain about 135 patients, though beds are spread for 30 more.

4. *The Columbia College Hospital*, situate upon the highest ground in the immediate vicinity of Washington, was recently used for academic purposes, and is an old building in a state of pretty good repair. It is a large four-story structure, in the form of a parallelogram, and said to be capable of containing 250 beds, when crowded. It has now 230 patients, with several hospital tents erected upon the level ground in the rear. Each story is bisected longitudinally by a narrow hall, with terminal windows, and flanked right and left by small wards. Opening upon each of these wards, by narrow doorways, are two slips or smaller rooms, barely large enough to contain a single bed

and chair, and totally unfit for dormitories for the sick. This peculiarity in the architecture makes ventilation exceedingly difficult, and the present absence of disease originating in impure air is due to open doors and windows, and the newness of bedding and furniture, and to the fact that the walls and wood work are not yet saturated by animal emanations. The removal of some of the partition walls would be unexpensive, and in the highest degree desirable.

No dead-house has been provided, and the hospital tents intended for communicable diseases, such as erysipelas and typhoid fever, should be further removed. There is a total want of water-closets, and the use of close stools, and consequent necessity of conveying the latter, by hand, through the halls, induces constant impurity of the air, and the risk of communicating such diseases as typhoid fever and dysentery. Bath tubs have been provided, but not running water, and the inconvenience attending upon general ablutions makes them in many cases impossible.

5. *The Alexandria Hospital* is also an old building, formerly occupied as a Seminary. It is an irregular structure, and badly adapted to hospital purposes. Its halls and stairways are narrow and abrupt, and many of its wards small and difficult of access. Its immediate precincts are damp from the proximity of large shade trees, and the wood-work of its piazzas and sheds is rapidly decaying. Ventilation is even now very defective, and an unhealthy odor pervades the building. The latter is due in a measure to the fact, that troops recently quartered in the building, had been allowed to accumulate filth in some of the upper rooms and the cellar. It should be stated, that the physician in charge, has used every endeavor to cleanse the premises, and is exercising admirable intelligence and vigor

in compensating for many of its architectural defects. There being no indoor water-closets or baths, the same necessity for conveying close-stools through the house induces the risk that obtains in the Union Hotel and other Hospitals. Evidences were exhibited in some cases of the prevalence of retained air poison, and when the windows and doors are closed during stormy or cooler weather, it is feared disease will be engendered.

There is no dead house. This Hospital now contains ninety-six patients, with an estimated capacity for 150.

For present demands, the Hospitals indicated possess some advantages, but should not be deemed models, or as furnishing precedents for the use of similar buildings in the future. Old buildings do not make good Hospitals. It is also fixed in the experience of those most able to judge, that large buildings are liable to grave objections. They form store-houses for morbid emanations, and are only comparatively safe when ventilated at great expense, by complicated artificial means. The scaly walls and cracked wood-work of old buildings present innumerable lurking places for foul air, and patients occupying such buildings are too frequently attacked by erysipelas, or scourged by Hospital gangrene. Even when such maladies are absent, the almost constant presence of animal impurities imposes a weight upon the recuperative energies of the sick, which by inducing debilitating complications retards or prevents their recovery.

We must remember, in criticizing these institutions, the circumstances under which they were selected, and the additional fact, that Washington does not offer many buildings suitable for Hospital purposes. Your Committee sees in these buildings a confirmation, if any were needed, of their belief, that wooden pavilions properly constructed and scattered, constitute the best Hospital structures. Upon the ground of economy, also, they would be preferable. We cannot deny ourselves the

pleasure of alluding in terms of well earned praise, to the medical men in charge. The difficulties encountered by them in quickly converting old and badly constructed buildings into Hospitals, in cleansing and furnishing them, and providing the necessary attendance and service, cannot be adequately set forth in the compass of a brief report. The results of their labors, constantly appearing, have evoked our surprise and admiration. The moral aspect of the wards is excellent, the sick being generally cheerful and contented, and there is every indication that the proper relationship exists between the doctor and his patient. Kindness seems to be everywhere prevalent and the nursing is generally admirable.

We come now to consider the condition and wants of the patients in the General Hospitals. Of these, nearly one-half had accumulated from the regiments stationed in and around Washington, many having been sent to Hospital when the advance took place previous to the battle of the 21st July. They comprised mainly, medical cases—diarrhœa, dysentery, miasmatic and typhoid fever; the surgical cases consisted of accidental wounds, and patients with varicose ulcers, and rupture, and also men suffering from phthisis, and other diseases with which they were allowed to enter the military service in consequence of imperfect inspection. This number was increased by the wounded from the action of the 18th July, but the great influx of wounded commenced on the night of the 21st July, and continued through the three or four following days. The total number of wounded and disabled men and officers who found their way into the General Hospitals in Georgetown, Washington, and Alexandria during the week following the battle at Bull Run was not far from 500.

They consisted mainly of those who were least severely injured in that battle; all of the fatally and severely wounded men

having been left of necessity, as it would seem, upon the field. The great majority of the soldiers wounded on the 21st July, who were seen by your committee in the several Hospitals, had reached them mainly through their own individual exertions, most of them having marched from the field of battle to their camps on the Potomac. There were many instances of men with bullet wounds through their legs and thighs, who walked over twenty miles during the twenty-four hours after they were wounded; and in one case, a poor fellow whose arm had been amputated above the elbow, on the field, reached a Hospital in Washington on the day afterwards in safety, having walked the whole distance. It is much to be regretted that he has since died from erysipelas in the Hospital on E. street. As a general rule, the wounds of these men were doing well. From the camps many were brought to the Hospitals in wagons and ambulances, but your Committee were unable to find an instance in which a wounded man was thus conveyed from the field of battle to a Hospital.

A very large proportion of the wounds were caused by bullets, and these not of the minié variety; some by grape shot and fragments of shells; there were a very few bayonet wounds, and but a solitary case of sabre cut. The temper and feeling of the wounded men was good; many of them were hopeful and buoyant, a few sad and depressed, but the general tone was that of men who felt that they had done their duty, and were ready to do it again. In some instances expressions of disrespect and blame towards their officers were volunteered in answer to inquiries as to how and when they received their wounds. In the opinion of your Committee the medical and surgical treatment extended to the sick and wounded in the Hospitals, is in the main excellent, and the supply of surgeons ample. The medical students supplied for the emergency

from New York, as surgical dressers, with a few exceptions, proved very useful to the surgeons, and were doing excellent service. The female nurses, also, as far as your Committee could ascertain, were of great comfort to the sick. They were tolerated without complaint, and, in several instances, their services were even highly spoken of by the medical officers in charge. In regard to male nurses, on the contrary, there was much complaint as to their inefficiency and want of aptitude and disposition for their duties; this was especially remarked of the volunteers.*

The supply of food, hospital stores, and medicines was ample and excellent, with the exceptions hereafter to be mentioned, but the Hospital Fund, the usual source of supply of extras in the way of comfort and luxury to the sick, in Military Hospitals, was entirely deficient in most of the Hospitals. The absence of this fund, which accumulates from the sale of the excess of the supply of food from the Commissary department over the amount actually consumed by the sick, and which is usually amply sufficient for the provision of all extras required in the way of chickens, milk, fresh eggs, porter, &c., &c., is explained by the recent organization of the several Hospitals, sufficient time not having yet elapsed for its accumulation, and also by the fact that the sick have required a larger proportion of their rations than usual, in consequence of their exhausted and depressed condition on admission, and the tendency, already observed in their ailments, to assume an adynamic or typhoid character. Your Committee were enabled to meet this difficulty in some degree, and very acceptably, by supplying

* The Commission has already supplied one professional male nurse, who is doing very acceptable service in the Georgetown Seminary Hospital, and it is probable that others will be required.

ice to the several Hospitals, from the stores of the Commission, this article being in much demand for the sick, and only obtainable by means of the Hospital Fund. Two articles of medicine not on the U. S. medical supply table—Delphinium, used for killing vermin, and Sol. of Persulphate of iron, for restraining $\frac{1}{2}$ bleeding, were asked for, and have been supplied by the Commission.

But the principal want experienced by the sick, and one which the Government makes no provision whatever for meeting, was found by your Committee to be clean and appropriate Hospital clothing. But for the liberal forethought of the benevolent women of the nation, our soldiers would have been compelled to lie sick and wounded in the clothes in which they entered the Hospital wards, and which, in many cases, had not been changed or even washed for weeks before. Many had been already supplied, and your Committee had the satisfaction of seeing, within a very few days after their first visit to the Hospitals, that every sick man in Hospital was fully provided with a proper suit of clothing, by the authority of the Commission.

No available provision being made by Government for the washing of the clothing worn by volunteers on their entering Hospital, the Committee secured the authority of the Commission for the employment of laundresses for this purpose; so that when the soldier is ready to leave Hospital and resume his duties, his clothing will be clean and fit for use.

The services of a barber were also authorized to be procured for the sick, and your Committee can bear witness that he contributed not a little to their cleanliness and comfort. Wire frames, for the protection of wounded limbs from the pressure of bed-clothes, were found to be wanted, and they were supplied. Water-beds, of India rubber, drinking cups, with

spouts, for administering food and medicine, splints, bandages, and lint have also been furnished. Bed-tables, with writing paper and franked envelopes have also been obtained, and it is proposed to add easy chairs, games, and other articles for the comfort and amusement of convalescents, as they seem to be desirable.

Another subject was recognized by your Committee as possessing much interest and importance, viz.: the provision of systematic and reliable means of identifying the remains of soldiers dying in the General Hospitals, and of properly marking the graves in which they are interred, so that the reasonable inquiries of friends and relations may be properly answered. This matter was brought before the Commission, and referred to a Special Committee, for immediate action.

In conclusion, and as the result of their observations, your Committee cannot refrain from expressing the opinion that, although they have spoken favorably as to the provisions for the accommodation of the sick, and their general good condition in and around Washington at the present time, if the result of the advance of the 21st of July had been more favorable to the national arms, if our troops had occupied the field of battle, and if a larger proportion of our wounded had been consequently brought by ambulances to the hospitals, together with the wounded of the enemy, the Hospital accommodations and supplies would not have been sufficiently ample to have met their wants, and the expectations of the nation. We would suggest that Government cannot err in making the most liberal provision for the sick and wounded, and in the promptest manner, by the accumulation of large stores of bedding and hospital supplies at safe and available localities near the main body of the army. It is a just estimate to assume the necessity of providing for ten per cent. at least of sick for an army

in the field; and this would bring the number nearer 15,000 than 1,500, whilst with hard fought battles in prospect, and the sickness of the autumn months, the percentage to be provided for will probably be much higher than this estimate.

Your Committee venture to embody their conclusions in the form of suggestions, and would submit to the Commission (2dly) the propriety of recommending to Government that hereafter instead of hiring old buildings for General Hospitals they should order the erection of a sufficient number of wooden shanties or pavilions of appropriate construction, and fully provided with water for bathing, washing, and water-closets, and ample arrangements for ventilation and for securing warmth in winter, to accommodate from thirty to sixty each, and to be sufficiently distant not to poison each other. This suggestion embodies the latest and best views as to the construction of hospitals, and its adoption would save both lives and money.

3d. If the funds of the commission allow, one or more practiced male nurses, selected from the civil hospitals of the country, should be secured for each of the military general hospitals, for especial attendance upon the more serious surgical cases.

4th. In view of the inevitable accumulation of chronic cases of disease in the general hospitals near the seat of war in large numbers, and of the great advantages that would be secured to many of them by change to a northern climate with sea-air, and for many other equally important considerations, your committee would suggest that the recommendation already made by the Commission as to the establishment of a general military hospital in the harbor of New York, be again urged upon the attention of the War Department.