

1776: Medical Care During the Revolutionary War

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The July 1976 issue of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*¹ [Figure 1] celebrated America's Bicentennial, and presented articles on American medicine during the Revolutionary War. This month, in celebration of America's Semiquincentennial, the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the 1976 issue is a trove of Rhode Island's medical history in 1776.

CHARLES E. MILLARD, MD, presented the Fiske Fund dissertation 1976 in the issue, titled "Rhode Island Medicine in the Revolution." He wrote, "the Revolution brought to the soils of Rhode Island the armies of Great Britain, France, and Germany and the Continental Army, and to our coasts and seashores the navies of Great Britain and France and the Continental Navy."

He wrote that diseases that caused the most morbidity were diarrhea, dysentery, pneumonia, malaria, smallpox, typhus, and battle injuries, but at the time, "the cause and nature of no single disease was known. The medical men could pull teeth, set a fracture of a horse or man, excise a tumor, evacuate an abscess, probe and remove a ball."

However, Dr. Millard noted, smallpox, which had devastated so many troops of the Continental Army, had been handled sensibly by Rhode Island physicians. **DR. JONATHAN EASTON** of Newport inoculated three persons for smallpox in 1772, those being the first cases treated in Rhode Island. During the war, **ISAAC SENTER, MD**, inoculated a regiment in May 1776.

The article stated the only precision instrument was the watch used to check the pulse. There were no stethoscopes, no thermometers, no clinical laboratories. The American Revolution Institute contains images of the medical instruments used [Figures 2,3] in that time period.²

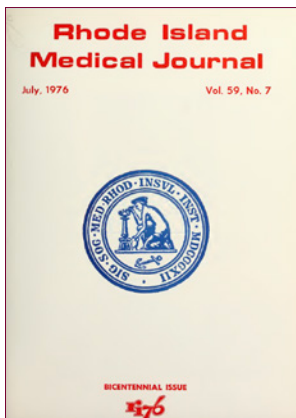


Figure 1. Cover of July 1976
RIMJ Bicentennial issue



Figure 2.
Leather case
for the surgical
kit owned by
Dr. Justus Storrs

(1756–1818), a surgeon's mate in the Connecticut Continental Line during the Revolutionary War. The red leather folding case has pockets inside for thirteen instruments, with a separate small leather case with pockets inside for four additional instruments.²

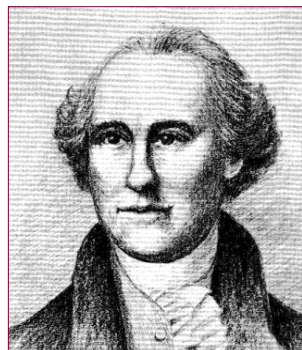
Medical training

The training of most medical officers was minimal in the 13 colonies. Dr. Millard wrote that of the 1,200 practitioners who served in the Continental Army as physicians, only 100 were doctors of medicine who had attended any university.

Another article printed in the Bicentennial issue, from the AMA, titled "Highlights of 200 Years of Medicine,"¹ stated that there were 3,500 "legitimate medical practitioners in the thirteen colonies." Of these, less than 400 "possessed medical degrees. Most had been trained under the apprentice system." Surgery, the article noted, consisted mostly of the



Charles E. Millard, MD



Isaac Senter, MD

amputation of injured arms and legs. "Many of the patients died of infection and loss of blood."

Dr. Millard wrote that the medical officers of the Continental Army were divided into two classes: the hospital physicians and regimental physicians and their "mates," or assistants. The hospital physicians were appointed by the Army surgeon-in-chief and were of a class "distinctly superior" to the regimental doctors. Their chief function was to accompany Army divisions and establish hospitals where there were large camps and military operations.

Young RI physicians

Dr. Millard acknowledged the roles of Rhode Island physicians during the Revolution, and noted their young ages. "Consider that at the outbreak of the War in 1776 the age of the most prominent senior physician of this group, **DR. AMOS THROOP**, was 38, and the other distinguished surgeon of the day was 35-year-old **DR. JONATHAN ARNOLD**. **DR. PETER TURNER** was 24; both **SOLOMON DROWNE** and **ISAAC SENTER**, 22; **PARDON BOWEN**, 18; **LEVI WHEATON**, 14, and **STEPHEN GANO** and **STEPHEN RANDALL**, both 13!"

He wrote that Dr. Throop was the first president of the Rhode Island Medical Society, who "treated patients at an improvised barracks at Rhode Island College (now Brown)." He also extolled the contributions of **CALEB FISKE, MD**, whom he described as a "lineal descendant of Roger Williams who served as a surgeon in the army of the Revolution in General Sullivan's expedition against the British at Portsmouth."

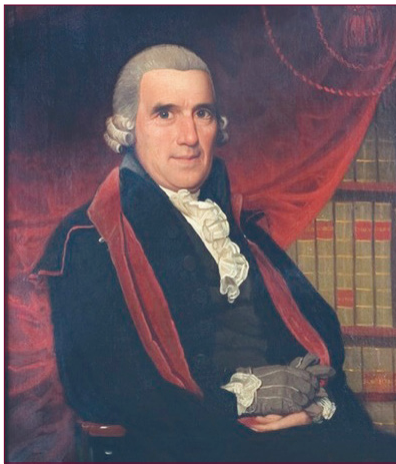
Patriots

Dr. Millard concluded his article by paying homage to the Revolutionary physicians:

"Another important and decisive factor must have been the deep-seated patriotism which activated these medical men. These patriotic physicians were daily exposed to virulent germs and much greater danger than members of the fighting forces to whom they ministered. **DR. JAMES TILTON** aptly described this when he wrote: 'My brethren of the faculty will probably think it an important fact that



Figure 3. Five instruments of the surgical kit.²



Dr. Amos Throop



Dr. Solomon Drowne

more surgeons died in the American service than officers of the line; a strong evidence that infection is more dangerous than the weapons of war.'

"The conviction of these physicians that their independence was worth any sacrifice, hardship, or suffering is best exemplified in the diary of **DR. ISAAC SENTER**... 'the trials and tribulations suffered by these noble Americans could only be endured by those who firmly believed in Patrick Henry's oft quoted phrase, 'Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death.' "

This Spotlight feature is but a glimpse into the history of medicine in 1776 compilation published by RIMJ 50 years ago. The issue is especially relevant as America celebrates its 250th anniversary this month, nationwide and here in Rhode Island, whether it be at the WaterFire celebration or at the legacy Bristol Fourth of July Parade. Happy 250th Birthday America! ❖

References

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