

FAMOUS FIGURES

Nikolai Ivanovich Pirogov (1810-1881)



Most of us believe that one or other of our own nationals was responsible for most advantages in Art or Science. The current spate of US claims to have made every discovery and won every encounter in the Second World War is good evidence of this. The life and accomplishments of Nikolai Pirogov remind us of this fallacy.

Pirogov was one of the greatest military surgeons of all time. Born in Moscow into a large family, he registered at 14 at the Faculty of Medicine and graduated three years later. Early in his life he decided on a career in surgery, but first became an anatomist – he was appointed professor at the age of 26. He later proceeded to the chair of Surgery when 30 years old, in the meantime having pioneered sectioning of frozen cadavera – perhaps the very first CT sections.

In 1847, he was the first surgeon to use ether as an anaesthetic during the initial treatment of war wounds. At the Battle of Solferino that year, in open fields and under deadly fire, ether narcosis (he called it ‘etherisation’) was applied on a large scale on the battlefield. He was well aware of the risks and complications involved in war conditions. In his *Report on the journey to Caucasus*, he wrote: ‘For the first time operations were carried out without the moans and screams of the wounded...the most consoling effect of etherisation was that the operations performed by us in the presence of other wounded

men did not frighten them, but, on the contrary, reassured them of their own plight. No doubt, the question of the moral influence of etherisation on the sick and especially on the wounded has now been completely solved by our investigations.’

In 1854, he was the first military surgeon to apply a plaster cast in the field and up to 1859 he initiated anatomy to military field surgery.

During the Crimean War of 1854-1856 in Sebastopol, when the wounded were being brought into the first aid stations in their hundreds, Pirogov was the first in the history of military field surgery to plan and to ‘execute the assortment of the wounded into four groups.’ Now we call it triage; it was Pirogov who thought of it first. Not only did he think of different priorities among the wounded, he also separated them into the two groups which he called clean and suppurative – another first.

Pirogov’s name is also associated with the early appearance of Women’s Services in the care of the wounded – the so-called ‘Russian Florence Nightingales’ – called by the Russians the ‘Sisters of Charity.’ ‘I am proud that I headed their blessed activity’ he wrote.

A year after the Crimean War ended, Pirogov, who like Miss Nightingale had struggled against the injustice and inertia of the military hierarchy, left his job as a teacher of surgery and moved to Odessa and to Kiev, as an administrator. Now he published his classic work: *Basics of general military and field surgery, derived from the observations of military hospital practice and reminiscences of the Crimean War and of the expedition to Caucasus*. It was first published in German in 1865 and later in Russian. The German surgeon and pioneer in surgical asepsis, E. von Bergmann said of him: ‘We must never forget that our German surgery is based on the foundation laid down by the surgeons of the French Academy, on the work of the Russian Pirogov, and of the Englishman Lister.’

References

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