

**AMERICAN CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE OF AUSTRALIA  
(NEW SOUTH WALES CHAPTER)**

**SEX AND THE CIVIL WAR  
- A MEDICAL PERSPECTIVE**

**AUGUST 2005**

This paper is based on the presentation made by one of our members, Dr Alan Winkworth, at the August 2005 meeting of the NSW Chapter of the American Civil War Round Table of Australia.

It is one of the few papers presented to Chapter members that would carry an 'R' rating or some other 'Adult' classification and, as such, the topic may offend some people. If this is the case, no apologies are given, for it was definitely part of life in the 1860's, just as it is today.

In presenting this paper, Alan Winkworth has leant heavily on his medical background with the result that we have a most interesting and informative paper and one that goes right to the very heart of the human suffering of the people of Civil War times.

For this, our members are most grateful and would wish to extend a big "thank you" to Alan.

To understand fully all aspects of the subject it will be necessary to know something about the sexually transmitted diseases as they affected males and females in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century and this includes, also, knowledge of the general state of medical knowledge at the time.

It has been said that war is most powerful aphrodisiac. It has always been so. A soldier of any rank about to go to a war where he had a high probability of being killed wanted to make sure that his loved one would carry his child while he was away. The aphrodisiac effect also affected the women in a society. They gave their favours more readily in war than at other times.

In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century the science of killing had advanced much more rapidly than the science of keeping people alive. There was no knowledge of the true causes of infectious diseases (that did not come until Koch revealed the bacterial cause of infectious disease in 1882).

There were additional problems relating to sexually transmitted diseases. The famous English surgeon and anatomist John Hunter (1728-1793), thought that gonorrhoea and syphilis were different stages of the one disease. He tried an experiment with himself as the guinea pig where he infected himself with pus from a patient with gonorrhoea. What he hadn't realised was that the patient, although suffering from gonorrhoea, was also incubating syphilis. The incubation period from infection to developing gonorrhoea is from 2 to 14 days, with syphilis it is from 1 to 13 weeks.

Gonorrhoea is a very painful disease in men. In women it is often symptom free unless you have complications. Symptoms in men are great pain passing urine. It has been described as like 'passing fishhooks and razor blades'; passing urine more frequently, and a discharge from the urethra with a fever. Complications can include a specific type of arthritis. In women symptoms can be often be very mild with lower pelvic discomfort and vaginal discharge. Complications of ascending infection lead to salpingitis with the possibility of peritonitis and death.

Symptoms may be minimal in infection involving the oropharynx and rectum. Antibiotic tablets for a week will cure it now but in pre-antibiotic days treatments were many and varied. It is a general rule in medicine that if there are numerous treatments it is likely none is efficacious.

This applied particularly to sexually transmitted diseases in the 1860's. Treatment was invariably as painful as the disease and often made the patient feel worse. Truly they believed in the old adage 'no gain without pain'.

Lues or syphilis is a killer. John Hunter's unfortunate experiment clouded medical thinking for the next seventy years as doctors considered gonorrhoea and syphilis to be varying manifestations of the one disease. The following photographs show some of the devastating effects of syphilis during Civil war times:





In my early days in medicine we were told syphilis was “The Great Imitator” because it could present in so many different ways. Not only is there a prolonged incubation period up to 13 weeks but the first signs are so seemingly insignificant – a small ulcer or chancre usually on the genitals about a centimetre across – painless, sometimes swelling of the glands in the groin. The ulcer heals in a few weeks leaving a small scar. The next stage may not show for months or years. It can take the form of a spotty rash over the body which is not itchy and disappears spontaneously after a few weeks leaving little or no sign of its passing. The third and final stage may develop for some years a distressing lingering and sometimes painful deterioration leading to inevitable death. There may be large painful ulcerating gummata over the body. There may be cardiac manifestation affecting the aorta, the main artery.

Neurosyphilis with pains in the legs, deterioration in balance, loss of sphincter control, headaches and dementia is the final stage. It was often called GPI – General Paralysis of the Insane. Another of the sexually transmitted diseases is lymphogranuloma venereum. Incubation period is short – 3 to 12 days, a small blister that ulcerates and heals quickly. It may even be unnoticed. This is followed by tender enlargement of the lymph nodes in the groin. This increases in size, becomes very painful and ulcerates often with multiple draining areas. Nowadays appropriate antibiotics will effect a cure. We know from Army Records a profile of a likely sufferer would show he would most likely be young, recently recruited, native born, in a non-combatant role and stationed near a city.

Interestingly, there appears to have been less venereal disease amongst the Confederates probably because they had fewer economic resources and, as a consequence, they spent more time in the field and less time near urban centres.

VD rates were highest in those from the Pacific West Coast. In 1862, there were 461 cases per 1000 men per year. One could imagine how painful it must have been to be riding horse pursuing or being pursued by hostile Apaches with the variety of symptoms from venereal disease.

All armies attract camp followers and different commanders have tried a variety of measures to keep it all under control. It is claimed that the term 'hooker', used now to refer to a prostitute, was named after General 'Fighting Joe' Hooker when he was in Washington DC.

In 1858, Dr William Sanger of the Venereal Disease Hospital on Blackwell's Island New York, not only treated the prostitutes but he persuaded 2000 of them to complete a questionnaire. Eighty-eight percent of the women were under the age of thirty. Forty percent were less than twenty. Most of his group, at follow up, had died within four years of entering their profession, usually from venereal disease and/or alcoholism. Sixty-two percent were foreign born, fifty-seven percent were Irish, twenty percent were German and eight percent were English.

One of every two hundred and fifty immigrants became a prostitute. Sanger concluded that New York City with a population of 1.2 million had seven thousand nine hundred prostitutes or one in fifteen of the general population. In Nashville and Memphis the activities of the prostitutes caused such a degree of concern that a system of licensing and regular physical examinations was introduced to regulate the industry. In Nashville three hundred and fifty two women were licensed and ninety two infected women were treated in a new hospital created for this purpose. It was noted that when large numbers of re-enlisted Union men entered Nashville the number of patients entering both the women and men's Venereal hospitals greatly and astonishingly increased. The inference is that the re-enlistees had acquired infection in their home state.

There is an interesting episode of N.I.M.B.Y.<sup>1</sup> at this time. A Captain Newcomb had a new paddle steamer, the "Idaho". It was under contract to the US Army. He was given a cargo of one hundred and fifty of the most disruptive of the prostitutes and told to take them from Nashville to Louisville. He was also told he would have to subsist them himself. At every stop along the river, men tried to get on, the women tried to get off and Captain Newcomb was refused subsistence from the various Army Commanders. Arriving at Louisville he was refused permission to land and told to take them to Cincinnati. There he was ordered to anchor opposite the town while his case was sorted out. After thirteen days he was sent back to Nashville. He was still waiting to be paid about \$5,000, a very large sum of money in those days, two years later. He had to take time off to spend a week going from office to office in Washington DC. He finally received a draft for \$5,316, by which time he had sold his interest in the "Idaho". The steamer was wrecked and lost in Louisiana in 1869.

Many Army surgeons published their memoirs after the War. Most of them gave their favourite prescription or treating sexually transmitted diseases. They were invariably useless we know now, and one would have needed a very strong constitution to tolerate them. Almost invariably they started with a good purge and many ordered them daily. These were followed by brews of various herbs all tasting vile and often associated with cauterisation by chemicals, or by heat, of any ulcer. Then there were the urethra installations of caustics, which sometimes were ordered every hour for twelve hours.

That there were so few deaths from treatment is a matter of great surprise. There was the saying:

*"A night with Venus, a lifetime with Mercury".*

This saying may or may not have had its origin in Civil War times, but it certainly was used frequently in those times. With such painful and prolonged diseases, prevention is certainly better than a cure.

During World War I and II it was said the only ranks who could use the excuse, "I caught it off a toilet seat", were generals and chaplains. Some tactics have not worked. Graffiti on a wall poster during World War I said, "A German bullet is cleaner than a whore". Someone wrote under this "But not nearly so interesting". Another poster in the male toilet at that time read "is an hour's pleasure

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<sup>1</sup> Standing for "not in my backyard".

worth a lifetime of misery?" Underneath this was written "How does he make it last an hour?" Such humour, however, was unable to conceal the catastrophic impact of these diseases in those times.

Regarding prevention, the only sure prevention was abstinence. For a large percentage of the population this was not considered as an option. What else was available? There is coitus interruptus, coitus reservatus, condoms, douches and sponges. The first two may prevent a pregnancy but they do nothing to stop STD and douches and sponges likewise won't stop STD.

Casanova noted in his diary in 1753 buying condoms by the dozen. They were generally made from gold beaters skin or small intestine of sheep. The latex or rubber condom was not seen until 1876. Their availability of advertising of them was often prohibited but word of mouth ensured a steady market.

With regard to the crime of rape during the Civil War, we do know that there were twenty two men executed for rape, but that number seems quite low considering the numbers of troops involved on both sides. Sentencing of soldiers found guilty of the crime was rather capricious. If the soldier were an Afro-American he had a very high chance of hanging. If white, he might get four years to fifteen years hard labour and have a twenty four pound ball attached to his left leg on a six foot chain. Some were ceremoniously drummed out of their regiment before beginning their punishment. Some were shot by firing squad and some were hanged. There were no lengthy appeals in those days. The time between sentencing and execution was about five days. Most of the victims of rape were Afro-Americans, far higher in number both North and South than white women.

In this paper so far the issues have been discussed in general terms only. Now a number of cases involving specific people are raised. The first is Daniel Edgar Sickles who was a politician and not a professional military officer. Sickles was admitted to the Bar in New York aged 21 and he has been described by Lowry as having the traits or personal attributes best described by words such as brass, cheek, impertinence, gall,chutzpah, flair, presumption and self-service. He refers to Sickles as the quintessential political general. At 22 he was admitted to New York State Legislature.

At the age of 28 Sickles married Theresa Bagioli who was the seventeen year old daughter of an Italian music teacher. Due to his political connections, in the same year he was appointed secretary of the United States Legation in London. After two years he returned to New York and was appointed a State Senator at the age of 30. At Albany he had four years of shady deals, bad debts and marital infidelity and he was preparing for his next career step, election to Congress.

About two years after arriving in Washington DC, he discovered that Theresa was having an affair which may well have been an effort of retaliation to his own infidelities. Her lover was Philip Barton Key, son of the author of the poem 'Star Spangled Banner' that is the words of the present-day American national anthem. This famous connection did not help the unfortunate Key at all since Sickles forced Theresa into writing and signing a confession of guilt, he then armed himself, found Key and shot him dead. At his trial for murder our politician became the first American to cheat the gallows on the plea of temporary insanity. The relieved Sickles returned home, informed his wife magnanimously that he forgave her. Theresa said she did not forgive him as he had produced the confession of guilt signed by her, as evidence in his trial. Theresa died soon after in 1858.

1861 he's in the public eye again when he was authorised by Lincoln to raise troops. The Excelsior Brigade (what an apt adjective for Sickles) went off fighting with Sickles as its Colonel. After Chancellorsville he is a Major General.

It was goo good to last. At Gettysburg he thought he knew better than his commander, Meade, and advances against orders into the Peach Orchard instead of going to the Round Tops with the result he loses half his men and his own right leg below the knee. That might have been the end of the story for most men but not for Sickles it wasn't. He hastily gets himself to Washington where he is able to do some "spin-doctoring" to make himself out as a hero who saved Gettysburg.

He is at it again in 1866 where with his wooden leg he is appointed Military Governor of the Carolinas, but he is such a vengeful tyrant that Andrew Johnson removes him the following year.

Even that is not the end. In 1869 he arranges his own appointment as US Ambassador to Spain. Four years later when American European diplomacy is at rock bottom, Sickles resigns to do what? To devote himself full time with a torrid love affair with Isabella II, the Queen of Spain. It should be said that this was not quite full time activity as he involved himself, also, in a scheme to put Alfonso, Isabella's son and one of many claimants onto the Spanish throne. He also tried to get his friend, Louis Philippe Albert, on the French throne after Napoleon III. Neither of these schemes came to a successful conclusion nor did another Spanish marriage. Subsequently, Sickles returned to the USA and is appointed Chairman of the New York State Monuments Commission. He held that job for twenty-six years until he was finally removed for graft, theft and corruption. Against this litany of faults, however, he did wage a campaign that was instrumental in securing the land for Central Park in New York and the Gettysburg National Monument. His story would make a wonderful topic for a television series, or a film, 'Sickles, Serial Schemer and Seducer'.

The next individual to be considered is the Very Reverend James Cook Richmond, priest of the Protestant Episcopal Church and chaplain to Second Wisconsin Regiment of Infantry Volunteers. His career was quite conventional. Born in 1808, he graduated from Harvard 1828, went to Europe for further study, and was ordained in 1833. He was a missionary in Maine and Illinois and travelled in Europe. He wrote 'A visit to Iona in 1896', 'A Midsummer Day Dream' and the beginnings of an epic poem 'Mita-Comet'.

When the Civil War started, the Second Wisconsin went off to war and Richmond went with them. Two years later he is in Washington and not with his regiment since he had become infatuated with a young copyist in the Treasury Building, Miss Rosa Bielacki. He wrote explicit letters describing her charms and over several weeks his letters become more and more disturbed, to the extent he felt she reciprocates his passion. He writes of 'your bosoms and your lovely body perfectly proportioned great round mountains of delight rising out of the odoriferous Valley of Cashmere'. He talks of the Prince of Love even now larger stiff and rising at the thought. This accompanied by drawings of a flaccid phallus and then of an erect phallus labelled 'nine inches long' in your presence. His letters become more disturbed. The girl obviously informs her superiors one of whom sends a memo to the Secretary of War.

*"A certain chaplain in the Army has annoyed one of the ladies engaged as a copyist in this office. His conduct is very scandalous, a part of the proof of which I send herewith. I have no doubt he is insane."*

Richmond agreed to leave Washington. As he was packing his belongings, his group of invalids at St Elizabeth Hospital went to the White House to meet with the President where Richmond told Lincoln he was 'driving the devil' out of Washington. The letters from Richmond have been preserved and as an aside I wonder what made Miss Rosa keep them. To me, it seems a bit like Monica Lewinsky preserving her little black dress after her encounter with Bill Clinton. In 1866 he had a farm in upstate New York and his sharecropper was going to remonstrate with Richmond after he had called the sharecropper's mother and sisters black evil strumpets. The sharecropper hit him on the side of the head and he died.

Nowadays one would hope that Richmond would have been diagnosed as a temporal lobe Epileptic and received appropriate medication. What lessons can we learn from these facts, figures and individuals? There is a delightful phrase in French:

*"plus ca change; plus la meme chose"*

which translates in English to:

*"The more things change, the more they remain the same".*

Human nature has really shown little change over the centuries. The pendulum of socially acceptable behaviour swings from puritanical oppression and rigidity to laxity, freedom of expression and relaxation of sexual standards. The participants in the Civil War and their families back home, paid the price for medicine's state of ignorance at that time.

We now have treatment for these sexually transmitted diseases but the world is going to pay a heavy price for the nonchalant attitude of the wealthier nations towards problems in the third world countries with a spreading epidemic of HIV AIDS. The terminal stages of AIDS sufferers is just as painful and harrowing as the last stages of syphilis. I once attended a lecture given by an STD expert from the USA when AIDS exploded through the gay community in San Francisco. He was asked about tracking down the contacts of patients. He replied that the average patient in San Francisco had about one thousand contacts a month.

The soldiers and families in “The War between the States” lived and died because of the state of knowledge and ignorance that obtained at that stage of history. We know now that the gospel of safe sex needs to be promulgated more widely but no doubt generations in the future will express shock and horror at our behaviour in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Source Material:**

***The Story the Soldiers Wouldn't Tell* – Thomas P. Lowry**

***The Merck Manual***

**The Greatest Benefit to Mankind – Ray Porter**