

## WHAT FUTURE THE DEFENCE MEDICAL SERVICES?

From time immemorial military organisations have always provided medical support when troops are committed to active service. Any responsible employer would be expected to provide the best support for employees and look after their health. In the case of the military there are occasions when troops have to be put in harms way and casualties may occur. Thus there has always been an expectation that a country will provide the best possible medical support during operations.

Today that means having a service at least as good as that provided by the NHS. It also has to be mobile, fit and capable of protecting itself. As troops are likely to be engaged at much shorter notice than in years gone by, the medical service has to be immediately available. This means predominantly regular service personnel, although with some augmentation from Reserve Forces.

However, the Defence Medical Services have been progressively eroded over the 25 year since the Falklands Campaign. The Military Hospitals have been closed, nurses made redundant and promotion prospects reduced. Not surprisingly morale is low. General Practitioners are capable of earning up to £120,000 in the NHS and the best young surgeons are able to top £200,000 including private work. One tour of a war zone is a challenge but repeated tours at 18 month intervals are demoralising.

Doctors, nurses and other medical specialisations have to be trained to recognised national standards and then maintain their skills. This used to be done in the much loved but somewhat archaic military hospital. Now it occurs in NHS District General Hospitals where military medics work alongside their civilian colleagues and can compare the differences in quality of life. The medical training in general is very good, but without military training and living in service messes, today's medics are not as well trained to work as a cohesive team in a war zone. Members of the Royal Naval Medical Service increasingly find themselves supporting land operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. It's not what they joined to do.

The United Kingdom is no longer capable of providing a dedicated hospital ship. Instead the Royal Fleet Auxiliary ship ARGUS has an additional Primary Casualty Receiving Facility and this proved invaluable during both Gulf Wars. However, the ship saw service in the Falklands Campaign as a container ship. The hull is already 27 years old but is expected to remain in service until 2020. The ship's main role is in support of aviation training. Although it is acknowledged to be an excellent life saving facility, there are no clear plans to replace it.

Similarly the Field Hospitals are old, mainly tented and were not designed for desert use. Modern medical equipment is sophisticated but not very robust. It is certainly expensive but must be dependable and used regularly. Our service personnel should have the very best medical equipment available to them should they be injured whilst serving their country.

More needs to be done to encourage doctors, nurses and the professions allied to medicine to join the three medical branches. They need pay that is equivalent to their civilian counter parts but with an additional element to include their additional military skills and liability for short notice operational deployments. Having joined and been trained to the highest possible standards, they need to be encouraged to stay. This means working as teams in a happy environment. It includes modern service accommodation and financial reward. In the military promotion is still seen as the main measure of success. Medics must feel that if they work hard and demonstrate their military as well as medical skills, then they will be rewarded by selective promotion to higher rank where they will have the opportunity to demonstrate their leadership skills.

The UKNDA believes that more needs to be done to support those that serve their country and are prepared to risk their lives. If injured they must have the best possible medical service and be supported as they recover. This will include psychiatric support an area where service knowledge is essential in those who help treat those who have suffered mental trauma whilst working in the military environment.

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MDG(N) 2002-2003