

Benjamin Rush's Letter to George Washington on the Care of the Wounded



ABOUT THE READING Benjamin Rush became surgeon general of the Continental Army in April 1777. He found the medical services in a terrible condition. Dr. Rush wrote a letter of protest to General Washington on December 26. Rush later charged Dr. William Shippen with doing a poor job of running the department. Congress cleared Dr. Shippen of the charges. Dr. Rush then resigned. The following excerpt is from Dr. Rush's letter.

VOCABULARY

disorders sicknesses

perish die

want lack

provisions food

physic medicine



As you read note the conditions under which doctors worked during the war.

I have delayed troubling Your Excellency with the state of our hospitals in hopes you would hear it from the director general, whose business it is to correspond with Your Excellency upon this subject. . . I beg leave therefore at last to look up to you, and through you to Congress, as the only powers that can redress our grievances or do us justice.

I need not inform Your Excellency that we have now upward of 5,000 sick in our hospitals. This number would cease to be alarming if our hospitals could afford such accommodations to the poor fellows as would ensure them a speedy recovery. But this is far from being the case. . . Old **disorders** are prolonged, and new ones contracted among us. This last is so much the case that I am safe when I assert that a great majority of those who die under our hands **perish** with diseases caught in our hospitals. . . Every day deprives us of 4 or 5 patients out

Dr. Rush says it was Dr. Shippen's job to write to Washington about the hospitals.

of 500 in the hospital under my care in this place. The same complaints are heard from every quarter. The surgeons have been blamed for these things, but without reason. I shall briefly point out to Your Excellency the real causes of them.

1. Too many sick are crowded together in one house. I have seen twenty sick men in one room, ill with fevers. . . .
2. The hospitals are provided in the most scanty manner with the stores necessary for sick people. . . . Beef and bread are by no means suitable diet for men in fevers.
3. There is a **want** of hospital shirts, sheets, and blankets to be worn by the sick. Nothing but a miracle can save the life of a soldier who lies in a shirt and blanket which he has worn for four or five months before he came into the hospital.
4. There is a want of guards and an officer to command them at every hospital. . . . The men, by going out when they please, catch colds, they sell their arms, blankets, and clothes to buy rum or **provisions** that are unsuitable for them . . . while within doors they quarrel and fight with each other, disobey their surgeons . . . and nurses. . .
5. The medical establishment is a bad one. . .

The hospitals don't have enough of the medicines and supplies they need to take care of the sick.

The air and diet of a farmer's kitchen are the best **physic** in the world for a soldier worn down with the fatigues of a campaign. I have prescribed them with great success in this neighborhood, but my influence is not great enough to make the practice universal through the department. . . . Perhaps the authority of Congress may be necessary . . . to facilitate the execution of the measure. If Your Excellency will only recommend it, I am sure it will immediately take place.

Rush wants all exhausted soldiers to have the benefit of staying with a farm family. He asks Washington to convince Congress to allow this to happen.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. According to Dr. Rush, what is the greatest cause of death among soldiers in the hospitals?

2. Why would having more guards and officers help the hospitals?

3. Why would it be good for soldiers who are worn down by the war to stay with a farm family?
