

The Medical Treatment of Shell Shock

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The document that will be the focus of this analysis is an article titled *A Method of Treatment of "Shell Shock"*, which was written by E. T. C. Milligan, M.D., B.S.Melb., Captain of the Royal Army Medical Corps (R.A.M.C.) in 1916. This article shows one of many methods of treating shell shock during the First World War. This article was published in the *British Medical Journal* July 15, 1916, and it not only describes the method that was used in cases of shell shock but also the types of cases that the method would be used on. The article provides the reader with a clear insight into how medical professionals were reacting to the growing condition of shell shock and the ways in which surgeons were able to treat soldiers with the resources and knowledge that was available at the time.

Edward Thomas Campbell Milligan was an Australian surgeon who served in the First World War with the Field Ambulance of the Australian Expeditionary Force from 1914 to 1918. He published in the *British Medical Journal* from 1915 onward on various different topics such as the treatment of war wounds by excision, his experience of shell shock and blood transfusions.¹ In the beginning of the article, it clearly states Milligan's reasoning behind why he wanted to publish this piece of information by saying, "A well-known method of treatment of hysteria has been applied at this casualty clearing station to select cases of what is now diagnosed as 'shell shock.' The results of this treatment have been so satisfactory that I desire to give some account of the details..."² Although the article does not explicitly state where Milligan worked, it states that he was working at a casualty clearing station which

¹ Royal College of Surgeons of England, "Plarr's Lives of the Fellows: Milligan, Edward Thomas Campbell," in *The Royal College of Surgeons of England* (2014), accessed 6 November 2024, [https://livesonline.rcseng.ac.uk/client/en_GB/lives/search/detailnonmodal/ent:\\$002f\\$002fSD_ASSET\\$002f0\\$002fSD_ASSET:378129/one?qu=%22rcs%3A+E005946%22&rt=false%7C%7C%7CIDENTIFIER%7C%7C%7CResource+Identifier](https://livesonline.rcseng.ac.uk/client/en_GB/lives/search/detailnonmodal/ent:$002f$002fSD_ASSET$002f0$002fSD_ASSET:378129/one?qu=%22rcs%3A+E005946%22&rt=false%7C%7C%7CIDENTIFIER%7C%7C%7CResource+Identifier).

² E. T. C. Milligan, "A Method of Treatment of "Shell Shock"," *England: British Medical Journal Publishing Group 2* (1916): 73.

would have usually been located quite close to the front lines. This piece of information is quite important as it shows that the treatments which he is referring to and experimenting with were truly happening and making an impact. This implies that his writings can be used as a credible source of information because he is seeing and performing the treatment first hand, while clearly and in detail describing the method and results of the treatment on five different cases where shell shock had impacted a soldier in differing ways.

Milligan published his article in the *British Medical Journal* fourteen days into the Battle of the Somme, which saw 57,000 men lost in the British army alone on the first day of the battle.³ It was also during this battle when shell shock and the men suffering from shell shock became a major problem for casualty clearing stations and hospitals as it started to drastically drain manpower.⁴ With this, it is no surprise that medical advancements and treatment of shell shock had to be advanced quite rapidly, and when one method had profound success, it needed to be shared with others. With that being said, the most probable audience for this article, given the title and publication place, would be that of other medical professionals. The easiest way for knowledge of this kind to be shared and administered would be through medical journals that others had access to or would hear about from other doctors or surgeons, which would allow for the methods to be spread and utilized, thus helping more people suffering from shell shock on the front lines.

The article goes over a treatment of shell shock that uses chloroform to slowly make a patient unconscious while making suggestions to the patient; "...during chloroform administration there is a stage before the involuntary struggling stage when a patient is highly susceptible to suggestion. It is

³ Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves : Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 39.

⁴ Shepard, *A War of Nerves*, 41.

while the patient is in this stage that suitable suggestions and stimulation should be used.”⁵ In this he also describes different cases in which this method has been used as well as the types of things that would be suggested. Milligan specifically focuses on cases who “could not speak, could not hear, could neither speak nor hear, cases of loss of memory, and cases obsessed by the memory picture of recent terrible experience.”⁶ It is clear that the types of cases which were most commonly treated via this method were those that could be directly linked to visible symptoms; that doctors could see and treat like normal injuries. The article is extremely consistent in the method that Milligan is trying to promote, and carries a very clear organization of information, going from a brief introduction and aim of the article, the nature of cases treated, the cases that are excluded from the treatment, and then the treatment itself.

An interesting note in his article is at the very end when he is describing why chloroform should be used over general anesthetic. He states that “chloroform is better than other general anaesthetics for this purpose, because it produces definite stages of anaesthesia which can be readily prolonged as required.”⁷ The reason that this could be considered important information is because it shows that during treatment, doctors would not just say one or two things to the patient as they were being put under, but they would prolong the experience and the amount of time that the patient is under the effects of chloroform until they believed that the patient has received and understood the message. Although this method was seen to have success, it raises questions about the after effects of the treatment due to inhaling chloroform for an undocumented amount of time. It is even more peculiar considering that during the First World War, chlorine gas was used as a weapon in the trenches to try and deform, injure, or kill the enemy and yet doctors were using chloroform to try and heal soldiers from mental inflictions.

⁵ Milligan, “A Method of Treatment,” 73.

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Due to this, it goes to show that although shell shock was beginning to be understood, medical professionals did not fully understand how to help those with shell shock without potential harm.

This document can be counted as a credible source as it gives insight into how doctors and medical professionals were viewing shell shock and trying to solve shell shock through the means that they had available. Since Milligan was a practicing doctor before the war, it gave him credibility and knowledge which would have helped shape his decision making and the way in which he chose to help those with shell shock. As well, Milligan was a surgeon and doctor on the front lines in casualty clearing stations. This gave him first hand experience with victims of shell shock and their various cases, thus allowing him to make a diagnosis and discover a treatment which worked well with the resources, conditions, and available facts that would have been present. From what has previously been discussed, the information that is provided in this article would be very exact as it was the knowledge of the time while also being sincere because the aim of the article would be to try and spread information to other surgeons and doctors so that they would be able to help soldiers who have been impacted by shell shock.

The main goal of the article was to spread awareness to the method of using chloroform and suggestions to help cure soldiers of shell shock. From this, it is clear that by analyzing the article, an understanding of how shell shock was viewed and treated with the knowledge and sources available can be had. The article shows that surgeons, such as Milligan, were trying to cure those who were suffering from shell shock but it also shows that they understood this method would only be able to work on certain cases which he makes clear from the start of the article. The impact that an article like this would have had on medical treatment is profound. It would be incredibly helpful and important in the short-term as it allowed for a successful treatment of a rapidly growing ailment that many soldiers faced. In the long-term aspect, this would have created a great impact too in both a positive and negative light. In a positive light, the article provides insight into how the medical field was analyzing, categorizing, and

treating shell shock during the First World War which makes it an incredible source for modern day historians. However, it would have created a negative impact because of the exact method of inhaling chloroform. This may have caused negative health problems for the soldiers in the long run especially if the patient had to go under multiple times to be cured, as chloroform causes a variety of health problems. With everything taken into account, E.T.C. Milligan's *A Method of Treatment of "Shell Shock"* is a great source for historians to use when trying to understand what on-the-go medical treatment was available and the creativity that doctors had to use in order to produce different cures and treatments for shell shock.

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