New Haven's Civil War Hospital
A History of Knight U.S. General Hospital,
1862-1865
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I confess, I am not a Civil War enthusiast, but I am interested in the history of medicine of the time and the history of medicine in Connecticut. This book touches on all three topics: the Civil War, the history of medicine during that war and specifically the history of medicine in New Haven, Connecticut. Ira Spar, MD, a retired Hartford orthopedic surgeon and member of the Connecticut State Medical Society (CSMS), has spent seven years scouring numerous national, state and local archives as well as letters, registries and hospital records to give an excellent, detailed record of the subjects.

War is the mother of surgery. Not that anyone would be proud to have such a mother and there are far better ways to advance the science of medicine than war, but the fact remains every war has seen advances in medicine. The Civil War was particularly vicious. Patients in a Civil War hospital had a mortality rate of 13.8%, compared to 1.5% in the Viet Nam War and 0.5% in the Iraq conflict. One in 12 Civil War soldiers died, and death from disease was twice the rate from wounds. The Knight U.S. General Hospital in New Haven, Connecticut was no exception to such statistics.

The Knight Hospital was named after the distinguished New Haven surgeon, Jonathan Knight, MD, who presided over the May 7, 1847 organizational meeting of the American Medical Association (AMA). That meeting is immortalized by Robert Thom's painting showing Dr. Knight, under the skeleton of a large-tusked mastodon, Mammut americanum, shaking hands with Dr. Nathaniel S. Davis just after passage of a resolution to form the AMA and elect Dr. Davis as president. The Knight hospital was formed primarily by the student, assistant, collaborator and partner of Dr. Knight, Dr. Pliny A. Jewett.

The enormous carnage produced by the Civil War and the thousands of casualties returning from the battlefields required the establishment of a war-time government hospital system. Dr. Jewett was leader of that effort in Connecticut. "How one proceeds from forty hospital beds to 136,894, from no general hospitals to 202, from 107 medical officers to over 11,000 and from a yearly medical expense of $115,000 to $1,594,650 is a journey worthy of study." There were 53,000 casualties in the three days of fighting at the Battle of Gettysburg alone. Over one million sick and wounded were thrust on society and the only answer was the formation of a government system.

The Knight hospital represents one small part of what is probably the first workable socialized medical system in the United States. It was a system financed primarily by the federal government, although state and private funds were also used. It can be considered a successful foray into a single payer system. The story of the formation of this system is well worth the read, one that was not without trials, tribulations, graft, corruption as well as personal honor and sacrifice. It shows the Civil War generation to have accomplished much under the trying conditions of a fratricidal war.

One of the most interesting chapters of the book is on medicine and politics, mostly because it was so unexpected. Frankly, Abe Lincoln does not come off as the saintly president he is often portrayed. His re-election campaign against democrat General McClellan in 1864 was down in the mud vicious and physicians and hospitals were dragged into the maelstrom. Soldiers were 2 to 1 in favor of Lincoln and consequently, hospital administrators were instructed to discharge soldiers home or to hospitals in their home state to vote, presumably for Lincoln. Some physicians refused to allow patients to leave, others discharged even the sickest.

Lincoln won re-election by a slim majority. "Out of 85,443 votes cast in Connecticut, Lincoln's majority was 2,427. He carried Hartford County with its 17,300 voters by only 9 votes. He lost in New Haven with its 18,155 voters by 921 votes. McClellan, the little general who won no major battles as a soldier was good enough for the citizens of New Haven County, a Democratic Party locality in perpetuity."

At the end of the war, the Knight hospital was closed as were many other such hospitals. However, the wounds and scars of thousands of soldiers did not disappear. Obtaining veteran benefits and pensions were sources of continued difficulties for all. Physicians who dedicated
themselves to the wounded came home to find their practices gone. Dr. Pliny never attained the chairmanship of surgery at Yale that he so richly deserved. He had been so bold as to suggest that the Knight Hospital might be used as the nidus of a new medical school. The Confederacy was defeated, but not the establishment of Yale. Only after his death was he recognized by all to have been a man of exemplary integrity and exceptional skill in patient care.

There is much excellent research on the medicine of the time. Physicians and how they practiced, how they treated the diseases of the day, as well as their role in caring for the sick and wounded on the battlefield and at home is very well-chronicled. The role of CSMS and the county medical societies is woven into the fabric of the book. There is a superb bibliography that would be an excellent resource for scholars of the era. All Civil War historians have much to thank Dr. Ira Spar for his superb scholarship and interesting story of the Knight US General Hospital in New Haven. This excellent book can make Civil War enthusiasts of us all. Even me.

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