Dominique J Larrey (1766-1842)

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Dominique Jean Larrey a surgeon in Napoleon’s army, was the originator of military medicine. Orphaned at the age of 13, he was brought up and supported by his uncle, a chief surgeon at Toulouse who encouraged his study of medicine. He completed his formal study in Paris and was appointed as assistant naval surgeon.

When war broke out in 1792, he was attached to the army of the Rhine, and performed first aid in the combat zone, and sent the critically wounded soldiers to the rear, in the "Flying ambulance" (horse drawn carriage). This was sharply different from the practice of slow evacuation of the wounded. At the age of 28, he was appointed chief surgeon of the Corsican army division and met the Emperor for the first time in Toulon.

Larry’s imagination, in planning for the health of the soldiers, and practical skill in the care of the wounded in the field hospital, equaled for several campaigns. Larrey earned the respect of the soldiers for his courage, humane care and surgical skill. On the battlefield, he gave first priority to the wounded in greatest need, irrespective of rank or grade.

The design and the use of “flying ambulance”, description of early amputation, frostbite and trench foot, the contagious nature of Egyptian Ophthalmia, are some of the examples of his contributions to military medicine. The therapeutic value of maggots in the management of wounds was noted in the report of his Syrian campaign. He published a four-volume treatise on memoirs and medical discoveries, in his military career.

Larry was wounded during the last battle at Waterloo and was captured by the Prussians. He was sentenced to be shot; but a former pupil saved him. Field Marshal Blucher not only gave Larrey his life, but also gave him safe passage to a neutral country, because Larrey had saved his son’s life earlier.

In his will, Napoleon bequeathed Larrey 100,000 Francs. He referred to him as “the most virtuous man I have ever known”