Clara Maass-A Medical Martyr

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Clara Maass (1876-1901) was born in 1876 at East Orange, New Jersey, to German immigrants. Clara was the eldest of ten children in the family. During her schooling, she helped her mother at a young age 15 to support her large family. Two years later, she enrolled in the Christina Trefz Training School of Nurses, at Newark German Hospital. After graduation Maas was promoted to head nurse at the Hospital.

During outbreak of the Spanish-American war in April 1898, Clara left her post and volunteered to become a contract nurse. She served with the Seventh U.S. Army Corps, and in 1899, volunteered again to serve with the U.S. Eighth Army Corps in Philippines. During the two terms of her service, she worked in Florida, Savannah, Georgia, Santiago, Cuba, and the Philippines. Miss Maass found that the deadly epidemics of yellow fever, typhoid and malaria were raging and battle wounds had taken the backseat.

After finishing her assignment in the army, Maass returned to Cuba at Las Animas Hospital in Havana. She was summoned by William Gorgas, who was working with the U.S. Army Yellow Fever Commission in October 1900. The commission was established during post-war occupation of Cuba, headed by Major Walter Reed to investigate spread of Yellow fever epidemic.

Army began a series of yellow fever experiments for the scourge that was claiming thousands of lives every year. Dr. Juon Finlay had already implicated the vector culex mosquito, but the theory could not be proven on any experimental animals. Major William Gorgas, Director of Hygiene in Havana, and Dr. John Guiteras, in the hope of aiding medical science, recruited human subjects. They thought that by inducing a controlled case of the disease from a mosquito bite, they could treat a light illness and help patients develop immunity. This was the first recorded instance of informed consent in human experiment. The volunteers were told that the study might cause their death. Incentive of $100 was paid with additional $100 if they became ill. Clara Maass volunteered to be bitten, along with James Lazear, an army physician and six others. Clara contracted mild disease from which she quickly recovered. In August 1901, Maass allowed herself to be bitten once again by seven infected culex mosquitoes (Aides Egypti). Researchers were hoping that her earlier infection would sufficiently immunize her against the disease. However, this was not the case. She became ill with full blown disease, and died of yellow fever on August 24 1901 at a young age of 25. Lazear also succumbed to Yellow fever. Clara’s death roused public sentiment and put an end to yellow fever experiments on humans.

The experiment had demonstrated that bite of infected mosquitoes transmitted the disease, but could not induce adequate immunity. Major Gorgas then directed his campaign, at total eradication of mosquitoes in the Collabra Gap, and succeeded in suppressing yellow fever and malaria there, without which construction of Panama Canal would have proved impossible.

Newark German Hospital was renamed Clara Mass Hospital & Medical Centre. Mass is a first nurse ever, to be honored, on the United States postage stamp.