

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

A HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF THE TRAINING SYSTEM FOR FRENCH MILITARY PHYSICIANS

The story behind today's training-system for doctors serving in the French Armed Forces is embedded in a series of establishments each of which has left its mark in history, maintained the closest links with centres of improvisation, and instilled in its students a deep sense of attachment.

It was at the very beginning of the 18th century that the first such establishment dedicated to military doctors appeared in France. It strove unceasingly to adapt itself not only to the needs of the military, but to the advancement and established use of knowledge pertinent to the changing conditions of military service.

Since then, piecemeal evolution finally resulted in the amalgamation of 2011 when, on the 2nd July, one single institution responsible for basic medical training was constituted --- the Defence School

of Medicine (ESA). Its inauguration co-incided with the closure of the two Military Medical Schools (ESSA) at Bordeaux and Lyon – Bron (Fig. 1).

The former was totally disbanded, with the latter losing only its administrative facility since the new Defence School of Medicine took over the buildings and their surroundings.

At the same time, there was a reorganisation of the establishments involved in both research and in the teaching of field-medicine specific to each separate Arm-of-Service. Their functions of instructional-training and scientific research were effectively separated; responsibility for the former passed to the Collège Val-de-Grâce (EVDG) in Paris, and for the latter, to the Military Institute for Bio-Medical Research (IRBA) at Brétigny.

Modern aspects of training for Service doctors (Medical Officers) are now, therefore, incorporated in the two most prominent pedagogical establishments, the ESA and EVDG. This is the outcome of a process spread over four centuries, and which therefore has a rich archive of pharmacopoeiae. It would seem, however, that this evolutionary process had taken two important channels; two „templates“ had formed virtually simultaneously, with one shaped for the training of future doctors serving in the Navy and the Colonies, and the other for doctors in the Army.

Genesis

Some „basic schools“ which had originally specialized in teaching elementary medical knowledge and surgical practices started to be annexed to Homes for Sick and Wounded Soldiers, founded at the end of the 17th century. The Navy was served by schools already specializing in naval surgery which were opened at Rochefort in 1722, Brest in 1731, and at Toulon in 1741. Each was situated near a hospital founded, respectively, in 1666, 1674 and 1689. A school was projected for the Army in 1718, in Paris, which took over as the Hospital for Invalids in 1727. Its original building had been opened by Louis XIV in 1674. Reasonably well-regulated, independent guide-lines, ordained



Figure 1. Le Médecin Général Inspecteur Jean-Luc Perret, Commandant of the Defence School of Medicine

by decree in 1708, were to be adhered to in all provincial military medical establishments.

Establishment of a System

Up until the end of the 19th century, „maritime schools“ operated without interference while expanding their field of practice. Under a new title of „Schools of Naval Medicine“ (1798), they found themselves in the ideal position of being able to collect and store documents and valuable artefacts brought back from distant voyages and exotic explorations. There could be anatomical specimens and anatomo-pathological samples from wounds and illnesses as well as zoological specimens and certain plants which could flourish in the botanical gardens of these Schools. Such collections gave rise to the important scientific task of drawing-up a detailed inventory itemizing the risks and pathogenic dangers to which sailors were exposed in peace-time as well as in war!

The Army template, on the other hand, was exposed to a more fraught passage due to a succession of changes in the location and organization of its instructional establishments, a passage even more disrupted by a series of adverse historical events. Nevertheless, interest was rapidly sparked by the formation of a two-tier system employing both a planning-level and an implementation-level. The former was initially embedded within the structure of Lecture Hospitals, then becoming known as Teaching Hospitals and, later, as Elementary Schools. These establishments were especially prevalent in Lille, Strasbourg and Metz. The planning mechanism was subsequently concentrated in the School at Strasbourg. Commissioned in 1856, the School accepted students who were to be educated under guide-lines issued by the Department of Health/Medicine.

The implementation machinery was centred on the Val-de-Grâce Hospital, opened in 1793, which, with its pedagogical specialization dating from 1837, performed as a centre of excellence, or „finishing school“. Unfortunately, this facility suffered direct consequences of the military defeat of 1870 which, in turn, led to the disbanding of the School in Strasbourg.

In 1889 and 1890, the School of Military Medicine and the College of Naval Medicine were founded in Lyon and Bordeaux respectively, and assumed remarkably similar symmetry. This could be seen predominantly in the identical architectural design of the buildings, and thence in the application of urban planning-laws which governed buildings

financed by town councils, or built near main railway-stations, and those close to hospitals. Finally, on the functional level, both establishments recruited by competition, offering military education and a university course.

After a short period, the naval system endowed two Schools of Instruction for the furtherance of doctors graduating from Bordeaux. One was opened in Toulon, in 1896, for doctors joining the Navy; the second, opened in Marseille in 1905, was destined for those called to colonial service. The three original Schools were then relegated to the status of Annex Schools, or Prep Schools, confining themselves to preparation for entrance-examinations to the higher Schools. The Val-de-Grâce College, in its turn, eased its position as a School of Instruction for Army medical officers.

Rationalization and Amalgamation

If this phase unfolds mainly in the 20th century, it's not because no links between the two systems had previously been in evidence. Indeed, witness the example of that excellent product of the organization, such as it was, Dominique Larrey, who completed one part of his training under the tutelage of masters at Brest before later teaching his students from the Grand Army the principles and tactics of warfare-at-sea, as drawn from naval experience.

The orderly de-partitioning of the two „templates“ made a significant start in 1925 with the establishment of a Colonial Studies department at Lyon. Graduating students would then complete a course of instruction at Marseille, thus becoming eligible for those colonial posts hitherto available only for their Bordeaux colleagues. From 1950, both Schools would demand the same entrance-qualifications. The corollary to this rationalization-process of the Medical Services was a) acceptance by both establishments of the title „Military Medical School“ (ESSA), and b) equal training and a standard uniform for students from all the Armed Forces, including the Gendarmerie. Meanwhile, and thanks mainly to a pioneering gesture of co-operation between Naval and Army doctors, a special branch of the Medical Services was provided for the Air Force, with its own specialized training-course.

In 1981, the Military Medical School (ESSA) at Lyon moved from its original location in the Avenue Berthelot to the former military air-field at Bron. This site offered modern surroundings with plenty of room (Fig. 2).

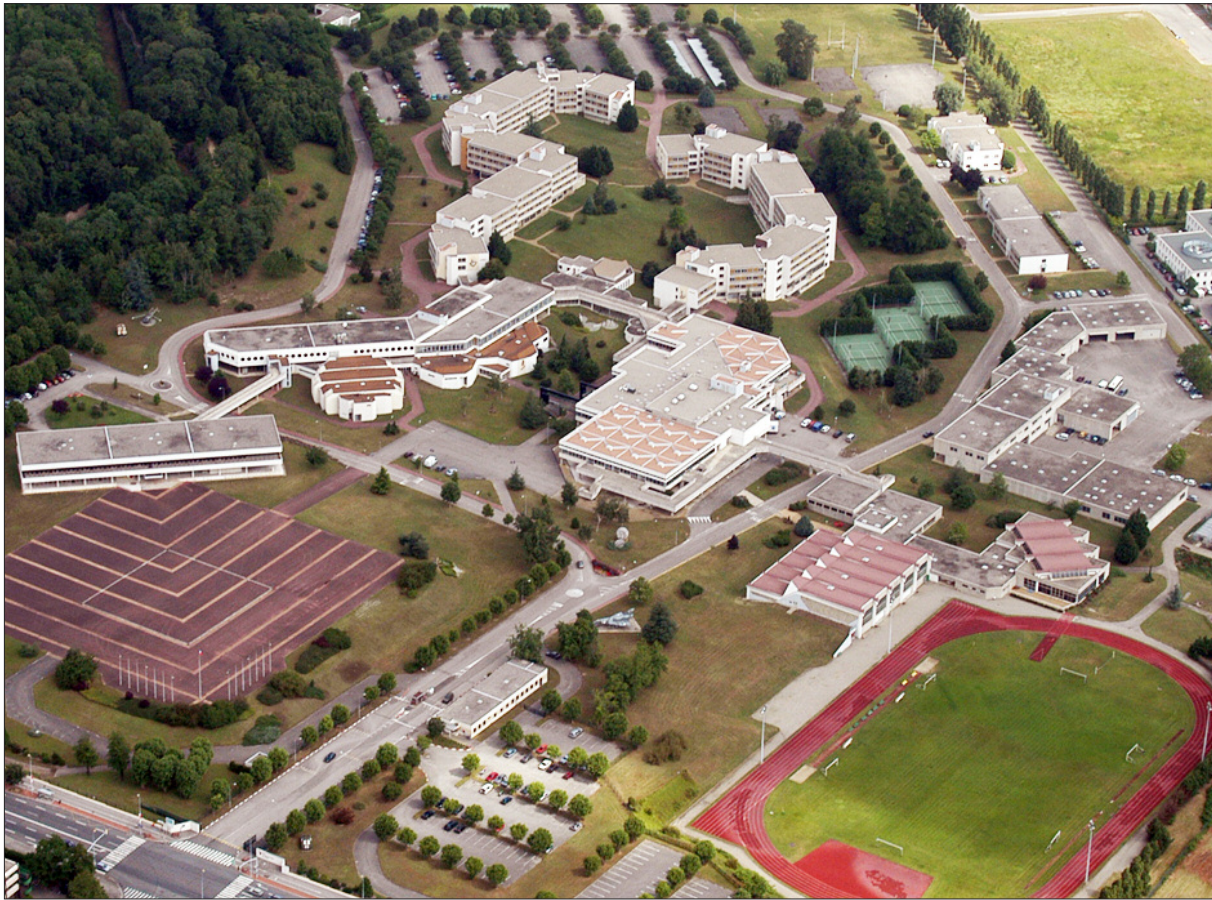


Figure 2. Aerial view of the Defence School of Medicine, Lyon - Bron

But the division of facilities into two Schools on two sites in order to achieve the same ends could hardly be reconciled with the rationale behind the, then, reorganization of the Ministry of Defence. Thus, the closure of the Bordeaux School was timed to coincide with the entry of the whole intake into the Lyon-Bron School in 2008. On the 16th June and the 1st July, 2011, the flags of the two Schools were carried to the Directorate of Military Medical Services.

On the 2nd July, the Surgeon-General presented the Defence School of Medicine with its new Colours.

Abbreviations:

ESA - École de Santé des Armées
ESSA - École du Service de Santé des Armées
EVDG - École du Val-de-Grâce
IRBA - Institut de Recherche, Biomédicale des Armées

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Le Médecin Général Inspecteur Jean-Luc Perret,
Professeur agrégé du Val-de-Grâce,
Commandant de l' École de Santé des Armées,
331, avenue Général de Gaulle
69675 Lyon - Bron
France
e-mail: jlucperret@yahoo.fr

Editorial work by Vladimír Měrka and Leo Klein

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