

Hilary Morris - Military and naval campaigning on behalf of the health of society, with reference to eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain

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The creation of the public health and sanitary movement of nineteenth century Britain has long attracted the interest of social and medical historians alike. Attempts by civil servants typified by Edwin Chadwick and the seemingly tireless work of medical officers who were tasked with eradicating the worst excesses of industrialism and urbanisation, have long lent themselves to an overtly heroic interpretation. Only in recent years have these achievements been revisited in a historiography that is prepared to be more critical of what was actually achieved, and question whether all lives were really improved. Yet despite the promising trend towards a more detailed analysis of the events and legacy of the public health movement, there still remains a reluctance to move away from the belief that the public health and sanitary movement in Britain was anything other than a civilian initiative bought into existence through an alliance between local and national government, which was endorsed by the medical profession.

The following thesis therefore aims to challenge this long held misinterpretation by arguing that there is extensive evidence of earlier, effective initiatives in preventative medicine which were not only identified but also actively promoted by military and naval medical staff, which have never attracted the attention of any school of history which they warrant. In the following chapters, evidence for such an argument will therefore begin by identifying how, from the mid eighteenth century onwards, an emerging military and naval medical specialism encouraged staff to look for ways of combatting the worst excesses of disease by identifying the initial cause of illness rather than relying on ineffective treatment. Moreover, in recognition of the large numbers this involved, medical staff in both armed forces were amongst some of the first practitioners to recognise the need to create a new paradigm relating to understanding the ways in which disease acted on the human body. This not only facilitated opportunities for improved classification but also created the opportunity for standardised treatment, across all populations, namely military and civilian.

In order to illustrate how this was achieved, attention will focus on the training commissioned medical officers received, along with a new empirical methodology which actively encouraged investigation. In the same way, the willingness to adopt an early use of quantification provided an opportunity to not only gather evidence but also establish a new standard regarding what was or was not seen to be acceptable in relation to the health of soldiers and sailors. Lastly, the inclusion of specific diseases allowed a general dialogue regarding issues such as rights, ideology, and a growing insight into the decaying state of rural and urban locations that gave these medical officers a position of authority in calling for the introduction of early preventative health issues long before the more familiar work of their nineteenth century civilian colleagues. Their achievements, both in methods and ideology, therefore call for a major revision of current historical research which persists in excluding the role of both the army and the navy when identifying what were the true origins of preventative health in Britain.