

Latest News

Navy medical journals describing 19th century life on the high seas revealed in new online archive at The National Archives

To tie in with this year's Archive Awareness Campaign theme, *Discovery – Archives in Science, Technology and Medicine*, Royal Navy Medical Officer's Journals (ADM101 series) go online today. As part of a cataloging project supported by the Wellcome Trust, The National Archives is making accessible 1,000 journals and diaries compiled by Royal Navy Surgeons and Assistant Surgeons who served on HM ships, hospitals, naval brigades, shore parties and on emigrant and convict ships from 1793 to 1880.

Stories of life at sea

The journals include a variety of colourful tales of 18th and 19th century ship life from drunken rum-related incidents, venereal disease, scurvy, shark bites, and tarantulas to lightning strikes, gun fights, mutiny, arrests and court martial not to mention ship wrecks and even murder.

The records

The records can be easily searched by the name of the Medical Officer, the patient, the ship or even by disease or ailment. Other materials contained in the journals include water colour illustrations, sketches, hand-drawn maps, charts showing details of the climate, details about the lay-out of the vessels and ideas about ventilation, and details of the countries visited and people encountered.

Interesting examples include:

Ship Life

- Drunken debauchery is a common theme throughout the journals notably one surgeon remarking "drunkenness nowadays in the Navy kills more men than the sword" and that with most diseases and accidents "you may trace grog as the principle cause of it" (**ADM101/125/3**). In one case a man performs animal impressions for rum (**ADM101/86/1**).

Experimental treatments

- Treatment for Pneumonia included blood-letting with one patient having 3.5 pints of blood let in 3 hours with the patient “rapidly proceeding to a fatal termination” (**ADM101/6/2**), diluted sulphuric is used as a gargle (**ADM101/91/4**), and fevers were treated with a tepid salt water bath “in each case making their fevers worse” (**ADM101/107/1**). Everyone mentioned as being treated with the bath dies but in spite of this the surgeon remarks it has salutary effects.

Disease

- Venereal disease was a common occurrence on board. One surgeon conducts an experiment on a young woman with venereal disease, with both her keeper and an officer having “connexion” with her to see how gonorrhoea and syphilis are spread (**ADM101/103/2**).

Curiosities and discoveries

- A surgeon recounts the case of a 12 year old girl who vomited an 87 inch worm (**ADM101/57/8**) and in another journal a surgeon describes what is possibly the first recorded case of a hermaphrodite in the Royal Navy (**ADM101/97/5B**).

See the web page www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/surgeonsatsea for more details of the files from the ADM101 series.