

INTRODUCTION

The advances in medical care since the post-Second World War period have raised the expectations of patients resulting in changes in doctors attitudes towards management. The performance of minor surgical procedures by general practitioners during home visits are now rarely undertaken. The situation was very much different in the past and many practitioners carried a pocket set of surgical instruments for use during their consultations. An example of such a set is described.

PROVIDENCE

The surgical instruments pocket set belongs to one of the authors (J.T.), having been handed down through an unspecified number of generations by his maternal side of the family (Agius Gilibert).

DESCRIPTION

a: The Instrument Case

The set of surgical instruments is contained in a small carrying case made of red fine leather. The case folds in three main sections and a flap which contained a "spring" clasp used to secure the case. When closed the case measures 155x75x25 mm, when opened the instrument compartment measures 155x225 mm. Each of the three compartments has two flaps which fold over covering the instruments. The case also has a side pocket measuring 155x75 mm and which has a smaller pocket compartment in one of its sides. The instruments are kept in place by a number of leather loops – 3 instrument loops in the first section, 5 loops in the middle section, and 4 loops in the third section.

b: Instruments

The first section holds three instruments including a screw-joint artery forceps without a

restraining clip (total length 135 mm; length of blades 40 mm); a thin trocar (without cannula) set in a small wooden handle (trocar length 40 mm; handle length 65 mm); and a triangular-shaped leather cover, presumably to protect a sharp cutting instrument (height 85 mm; width 25 mm). The Middle section holds five instruments including three bistouries or scalpels which fold into tortoise-shelled handles. The bistouries' blades are marked at the base of the blade by the Royal Crown and the letters STD and DART. (a. straight sharp-pointed – blade length 65 mm, handle length 87 mm; b. straight broad-pointed – blade length 63 mm, handle length 87 mm; c. curved sharp-pointed – blade length

(tip-to-base) 70 mm, handle length (tip-to-tip) 100 mm.

The other instruments in the middle section includes a Schnapper's lancet which folds between two tortoise-shell handles (blade length 55 mm, handle length 73 mm); and a director for probes with a fraenum slit (length 140 mm ends in a side-attached ring 12 mm diameter). The third section holds two probes one ending in a sharp trocar point, the other in an eye (length 130 mm); a Gum lancet which folds in a tortoise-shell handle (blade length 70 mm, handle length 85 mm); a pair of sharp-pointed angled on flat screw-joint scissors (one blade broken) (length 140 mm, blade length 45 mm); and a Pestle which



unscrews from about a third of its length. Its cavity appears coated mildly with yellowish powder. The Side Pocket contains two small lancets for venesection or vaccination; which fold into a tortoise-shell handle (blade length 40 mm, handle length 55 mm); a set of ten triangular cutting-pointed eyed curved needles of various sizes for suturing (min. diameter 35 mm, max. 57 mm); and a paper packet containing bright orange powder of unknown constitution.

DISCUSSION

The described set would allow for the performance of minor surgical procedures including the excision of small superficial tumours, drainage of abscesses or hydrocoeles, management of sinuses, suturing of lacerations, and venesection. It would also facilitate smallpox vaccination via scarification, and also allowed for the preparation of ointments, etc.

A number of medical sets from Malta have been described. These sets were either fully equipped medicine chests for use on naval vessels during the seventeenth century, or fully equipped surgical sets used by the late eighteenth century surgeon Prof. S.L. Pisani. The

provision of a ship's medicine chest was enforced by Maltese law during the time of the Order of St. John. The described chest dated to 1662 contained no less than 55 kinds of medicinal preparations. The instruments in the chest included a pair of tweezers, cupping vessels, and a syringe for performing rectal enemas. There was no mention of lancets, bandages, pestle and mortar, balance, ointment slabs or splints¹. The second set of two instrument cases belonged to Prof. S.L. Pisani. These were bought from Young of Edinburgh and from Weiss of London. These instruments contained a large variety of surgical instruments which allowed the performance of a large number of major surgical procedures including amputations and lithotomies².

Another incomplete nineteenth century instrument case is held at the Malta Medical School old instruments collection. The present paper is the first to describe a pocket set of surgical instruments. The selection of instruments contained in the described pocket set dates this to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, and it probably originated from the United Kingdom. A similar instrument case was still being offered for sale by Allen & Hanburys Ltd of London in 1957.

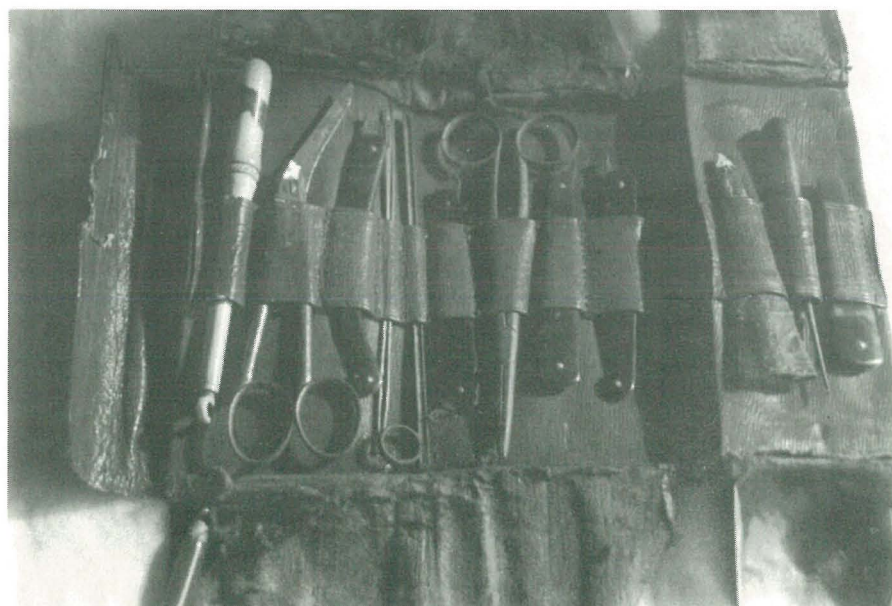
This was made of rexine and had a removable washable lining and 12 loops for instruments. Other variants of pocket cases, constructed from metal, khaki drill or Morocco, were also offered for sale. The contents included two double pocket knives, scissors, dissecting forceps, a Spencer Wells' Artery forceps, a caustic case, a probe with eye, a spatula, and an aneurysm needle and director³.

Pocket instruments sets are still being offered for sale by a number of instrument makers, though these cases are usually made of metal to facilitate sterilization^{4,5,6,7}. Surgical instruments in Malta were not easily available to local practitioners during the nineteenth century.

Occasionally a few surgical instruments were manufactured by Maltese silversmiths, but as late as 1871 private practitioners were not adequately supplied since civilian surgeons are noted to have taken instruments on loan from Bighi Naval Hospital or from the government Civil Hospital. Instruments at the Civil Hospital which became unfit for further repairs were condemned and sold by public auction⁸.

Pocket medical instrument sets were in use during the early nineteenth century, being an essential item carried by army and naval medical officers. The pocket-case of surgical instruments was often the only surgical kit available to the army practitioner in the field since problems in transportation and organization often resulted in medical stores not reaching the field. Thus Surgeon Thomas Longmore of the Green Howards Regiment during the Crimean War landed at Calamata Bay to find that his medical provisions had been returned to Malta.

He thus went to the battle of Alma carrying only a small haversack and his small pocket



case of instruments⁹. The provision of the pocket-case of instruments became a strictly observed requirement in the Royal Navy by 1825. Each young doctor who joined his first ship had to supply himself with a small pocket-case of instruments not exceeding a cost of £5. This was to contain a scalpel, forceps, needles and sutures, to which later a hypodermic syringe was added. The abolition of the pocket-case was only approved by the Board of Admiralty in November 1933¹⁰.

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- 10 Lloyd C, Coulter JLS. *Medicine and the Navy 1200-1900*. Livingstone: Edinburgh, 1968, vol. 4, p. 41, 273.