

Historical Happenings

THE TRIANGULAR BANDAGE

It is generally, but not universally, accepted that the triangular bandage was invented by Professor Friedrich Esmarch. The contender for recognition as the inventor of the bandage is Dr Mathias Mayor, a surgeon of Lausanne, Switzerland. He is said to have created the 'handkerchief bandage' in 1831, some 40 years before Professor Esmarch introduced his bandage into the German army.

However, Esmarch is usually quoted as the inventor and indeed the bandage is often referred to as the 'Esmarch Bandage'. Professor Esmarch was Professor of Surgery at the University of Kiel, Germany. He was not only a University professor, but also the Surgeon-General to the German Army during the Franco-Prussian War. That war was waged in 1870 and 1871. The Esmarch bandage was made of linen or cotton. Sizes varied but were generally about 4 feet (122 cm.) long at the base and with sides of 2 feet 10 inches (86 cm.). It is said that German army personnel were issued with such a bandage so that each soldier could treat himself if wounded in the fray of battle.

St John Ambulance began teaching the application of the triangular bandage as far back as 1887. Knowing how to tie a reef knot and how to apply a collar and cuff were essential skills for any competent first aider. There were apparently 32 ways in which to use a triangular bandage. Now there is a challenge! The illustration shows Princess Elizabeth, now the Queen and Sovereign Head of our Order, applying a triangular bandage to her younger sister, Princess Margaret when they were both Girl Guides.

As an aid, early triangular bandages were illustrated with many of the 32 ways of applying the bandage. It probably did not inspire confidence in the casualty if the first aider spent too long studying the bandage for inspiration. The St John Ambulance Historical Society has some twenty illustrated triangular bandages in its collection. A typical illustrated bandage is shown below. Another can be seen outside Training Room 3 in the Headquarters Building.

This year (2012) marks the 125th anniversary of St John Ambulance teaching the use of, and actively applying, triangular bandages. The bandages' uses include being a means of holding wound dressings in place and of supporting injured (including fractured) limbs, either directly or by securing splints. One wonders how many casualties worldwide during this past 125 years have been assisted by this simple triangular piece of cloth.

References: A History of the Triangular Bandage, Vincent Little, Pharmacy History Australia, No. 9, 1999.

Discover Britain, June, 2012.

Question: When, and on what occasion, was the first official public duty of the St John Ambulance Brigade in England?

Brian Fotheringham
Chairman



historical society



Answer to the last question: Plants convert carbon dioxide into sugars using the energy of sunlight in a process called photosynthesis.



The St John Ambulance
Historical Society
of South Australia