

Deputy Inspector-General of Hospitals & Fleets, 1879.

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Deputy Inspector-General of Hospitals & Fleets 1879

As described by the novelist Smollett (who had served as ship's surgeon) the sick-berth of an 18th century man-of-war was a grim place with "about fifty miserable wretches so huddled that only fourteen inches of space was allotted for each, and no light of day or fresh air."

But medical arrangements in the Navy gradually improved over the years, and in 1832 one of the five "Principal Officers" of the Admiralty Board was the Physician-General of the Navy. Later the naval Medical Service consisted of a Director-General; Inspectors and Deputy Inspectors of Hospitals and Fleets; Surgeons; and Assistant Surgeons. In 1863 the "Civil" branches of the Navy took to wearing distinction cloth of various colours between the gold lace cuff rings. For the Medical Service this cloth was red.

The background of this illustration is Greenwich Hospital, as it is still called, although the Royal Naval College has occupied it for more than eighty years. It stands on the site of an ancient royal residence pulled down and then rebuilt by Charles II. Then in 1694 Wren was commissioned to make plans for a Naval Hospital here. At one time as many as 2,700 retired seamen were boarded in the Hospital, but later so many were out-pensioners that the building was given over to the Naval College which moved from Portsmouth.