

Historical Profiles of Mayo

World War II and Mayo

Fifty years ago, the Mayo Clinic and Mayo Foundation responded to the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941 with personnel and programs designed to help expedite the conclusion of hostilities. Several Mayo staff members and residents had commissions in the reserve corps of the army or navy, and 63 had already left for active duty before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Since the 1930s, the Mayo Clinic and Foundation had sponsored reserve Naval Specialist Units 54 and 56. Likewise, the 71st Army General Hospital, a reserve facility, had been established in Rochester, Minnesota, in 1940 and was primarily staffed by clinic personnel. After the United States entered into the war, the Mayo naval units were assigned to the US Naval Hospital in Corona, California. The Mayo army hospital was later reorganized as Station Hospitals 233 and 237 in New Guinea.

During the war, the number of patient registrations unexpectedly increased. For the medical professionals who remained at the clinic, meeting the needs of the increased patient load was often difficult.

Because of the all-out war effort, Mayo nonmilitary research studies were generally discontinued or temporarily deferred. The newly formed Mayo Aero-medical Unit, which conducted research in aviation medicine, worked in close cooperation with the Air Surgeon. Investigations of the physiologic responses to high-altitude flying, administration of oxygen and its use in therapy, centrifugal force, aeroembolism, and adaptation to the dark that were initiated in collaboration with Wright Field and the Office of Scientific Research and Development were continued and extended. Mayo shared the results of these studies with the military at no expense to the government.

At the Mayo Institute of Experimental Medicine and in the laboratories of the clinic, the following subjects were investigated: shock; tissue culture; chemotherapy, gramicidin, penicillin, and the sulfonamides; experimental control of tuberculosis; blood flow; regeneration of nerves; muscle metabolism; function of the adrenal cortex; viral diseases; and nutrition. Saint Marys Hospital, a Mayo-affiliated hospital, also housed studies relating to sensitivity to the cold and electroencephalography, which were germane to military needs.

In 1942, training courses for officers assigned by the Surgeon Generals of the army, navy, and Public Health Service and by the Veterans Administration were initiated at Mayo. Like Mayo courses given during World War I, they were designed to review and discuss those phases of medicine and surgical procedures that were directly applicable to field conditions in the war. Between 1942 and 1944, more than 1,000 officers participated in these programs.

The pioneering Mayo program in physical therapy that had been instituted in 1938 provided physical therapists. The usual 12-month program was condensed to 6 months, and the number of students was expanded from 25 to 50 per class.

During the war, certain governmental agencies including the National Research Council appointed members of the staff to various responsibilities and committees. By 1944, 19 Mayo staff members were serving in such appointments.

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