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# Lesson Plan

## *It Wasn't a Bullet*

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### Grades

4, 5, 6

### Subjects

Drama, Language Arts, Science, Social Studies

### Time Allotted

60 minutes

### Setting

Classroom

### Group size

5 to 30 students

### Skills

Group discussion, critical thinking, and writing

### Methods

The learner will discover through role playing that diseases killed most Civil War soldiers.

### Materials

Index cards with illnesses and medicines, pencils, paper

### Keywords

Dysentery  
Folk medicine  
Gangrene  
Home remedy  
Hygiene  
Malaria  
Sanitation  
Sterilization  
Typhoid  
Typhus

### Objectives

At the end of the activity, students will be able to:

- *Explain why poor medical practices killed many soldiers.*
- *Explain care given to wounded soldiers in Civil War hospitals.*



#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Medical science was just beginning to be understood at the onset of the Civil War. Germs were unheard of, and surgery techniques had not been improved since the early 1800's. Hospitals were rarely used since most sickness was treated at home. Medicines were primitive and in many cases prescribed on an experimental basis.

More than 600,000 soldiers died in the Civil War, and more than half of them died of disease. The most common being typhoid, typhus, measles, mumps, smallpox, and malaria. The main causes for so many deaths from disease were due to poor diet, hygiene, and sanitation.

Civil War hospitals could frighten even the bravest soldier. They were usually over-crowded, unsanitary and filled with germs. Soldiers had a poor opinion of the medical staff because they had observed first hand the amputations of arms and legs as a precaution against gangrene. The soldiers were afraid, and believed some of the amputations were not necessary because not everyone got gangrene.

Many times soldiers died of infection after being treated in unsanitary situations. Sterilization of wounds was not accepted until 1865, and sterilization of a surgeon's hands and his surgical tools began much later.

The Southern doctor had an especially difficult time because he could not obtain the latest medicines due to the blockade of Southern ports. Substitutes were used as well as home remedies or folk medicine.

#### ACTIVITIES

- Ask students how they think most Civil War soldiers died.
  - Explain why most soldiers died of disease rather than gunfire.
  - Ask students what it would be like to work in a hospital where hundreds of wounded soldiers are constantly arriving.
- Optional:* Read an excerpt from Hospital Sketches by Louisa May Alcott.
- Define different illnesses and symptoms.
  - Divide the class into 6 teams. One member is the camp doctor and the other members are sick soldiers. Give each sick soldier a card with his problem on it. Give the doctor his card with his medicines. These are actual "cures" from the war.
  - Tell the teams to see what their doctor would use to cure them.
  - Class discussion to compare cures and reveal answers.

#### FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

- Have students research to discover what the cures for these problems would be today.
- Ask students to imagine they are a camp doctor or nurse. Write a diary entry of their typical day.
- Have students research a native plant that was used by early Americans for medicinal purposes. Research “home” remedies or folk medicines still in use today.
- Divide class into groups of five and explain that one member is a newspaper reporter, one is a doctor in a war hospital, one is a nurse and the other two are patients. It is the week after a major battle. The reporter has been assigned to interview the others to determine whether adequate care is being provided for the wounded.
- “Women in the War” activity in this guide.

#### RESOURCES

- Adams, George Worthington. *Doctors in Blue*. New York, Collier Books, 1952.
- Alcott, Louisa May. *Hospital Sketches*, 1864. Reprinted by Applewood Books, Bedford, MA, 1993.
- Cunningham, Horace Herndon. *Doctors in Grey*. Louisiana State University Press, 1958.
- Denney, Robert E. *Civil War Medicine*. New York, Sterling Publishing Company, Inc. 1994. (pgs. 181-182 contain reprint of Hospital Sketches excerpts.)
- Holt, Daniel M. *A Surgeon's Civil War*. Kent, OH, The Kent State University Press, 1994.
- Oates, Stephen B. *A Woman of Valor: Clara Barton and the Civil War*. New York, The Free Press, 1994.

**APPENDIX**  
**Illnesses and Doctor's Cures**

<p><b>Illness</b> Cold</p> <p><b>Doctor's Cure</b> Mix molasses and water. Drink as much as possible.</p>	<p><b>Illness</b> Cough</p> <p><b>Doctor's Cure</b> Mix vinegar and salt. Take one teaspoon several times during the day.</p>
<p><b>Illness</b> Diarrhea</p> <p><b>Doctor's Cure</b> Turpentine, castor oil, camphor, pills of mercury and chalk</p>	<p><b>Illness</b> Malaria</p> <p><b>Doctor's Cure</b> Whiskey, quinine, cinnamon, ammonia</p>
<p><b>Illness</b> Dysentery</p> <p><b>Doctor's Cure</b> Opium or strychnine</p>	<p><b>Illness</b> Toothache</p> <p><b>Doctor's Cure</b> Mix salt and alum and apply to infected area.</p>