

Wounded Soldiers

I don't know if you'll remember me, but if you know the family history of Terry and Darren, maybe you remember that I'm their doctor, and I told the story of Darren's circumcision. I think I mentioned I'd started my career, a long time ago, as a medic in the Army. If I'm honest, Army life was not for me, but it has its compensations. Like, it paid for me to go to Medical School, and gave me a salary while I was there. All it asked in return was, I should take up a short-service commission after I qualified, which I did, well, quite a few years ago. I found myself somewhere near Aldershot, Medical Officer to a Unit that took in new recruits for twelve weeks basic training, and tried to make soldiers of them. I thought it wasn't going to be exciting, and I hoped it wouldn't last long. I sat in the MO's room, and wondered what Captain Benson, my predecessor, had done to improve his job-satisfaction. I soon found out.

It turned out I had a couple of orderlies, Corporal Cooper and Corporal Hussein. John Cooper was a dark, stocky little South Londoner who had come in, out of uniform, on a Sunday, to show the new MO the ropes. It was pretty obvious that as long as I left him to organise things, it would all go like clockwork. He explained how things worked, and what the forms meant, and what I needed to know on Monday morning. I could tell he was sussing me out, but I wasn't sure about what, until we'd got everything together and I was about to go back to the Mess. Then suddenly he said, 'Scuse me, sir, but me and Sami - that's Cpl. Hussein - we was wondering, was you going to go on with the circumcisions?'

'What circumcisions? I don't understand.' But I was going to.

'Well, sir, Captain Benson was a great believer in the circumcisions. For medical reasons, sir. 'Cause often the lads get sent out to hot countries. That sort of thing.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'And Captain Benson believed in trimming their wicks? Well, well.'

'Oh yes, sir.' Now he could see I didn't dismiss the idea out of hand, Cooper got quite enthusiastic. 'See, most of them these days, they don't do them when they're kids. So we get a crack at it when they come to us. And they're all the better for it, sir.'

'How do they feel about it?'

'I think some of them are a bit sore, after. I mean, a bit, like, *tender*.' He grinned.

'I expect so, but that wasn't what I meant. I meant, how do they like the idea?'

He looked at me, a bit closely, I thought.

'We don't really ask. See, sir, it's different for you, being an officer and all. But when these lads come in, we've got twelve weeks to make them into fighting men. That means they've got to have discipline, and they've got to obey orders without thinking. And it's got to start straight off, so what's the first thing we do? We take away their first names. It's last names only, and some of the time it's numbers. We put them in a barrack hut, that's sixteen guys at a time, and you seen that, sir, it's not like home. We take away their civvy clothes and we make them wear uniform. That first night, the hut's cold, we make sure of that, so they don't get all their sleep. Then we wake them at six in the morning, into their kit, *NOW*, and out on a run, followed by a nice, cold shower. A good breakfast, course, but then it's drill all morning on the square, with Sergeant Bell shouting at them, and everything done at the double. A bit of dinner, then it's into the changing room down the corridor here, off with their kit down to their underpants. They sit on those chairs outside in the corridor, where everyone's coming to and fro, and we call them one-by-one in here for the medical. Sir, those poor little buggers don't know what's hit them. Sami and me, that's Corporal Hussein, sir, we do the usual, height, weight, blood pressure, eyes, ears. It's all on the form there. Then you do the reflexes. And then they drop their Y-fronts for the hernia test. And that's when you fill in that little box there, sir, in the bottom left hand corner. C for cut, U for uncut.' He paused. 'And R for recommended. Captain Benson used to put a lot of Rs in that box.'

I could see he was still trying to suss me out. 'Ah,' I said. 'Did he?'

'Oh, yes, sir. See, it's good for them, isn't it?'

'Is it? Well, I'll tell you something. I've never circumcised an adult.' He looked disappointed. 'So, maybe I'm going to need some advice from you.'

'Ah, well, sir, you're the doctor'. He had brightened up. I looked him in the eyes.

'Yes,' I said, 'yes, I am. So you're going to drop your pants right now. And we'll check if you need an R in the box.'

'Sir.' He was doubtful. 'Sir, I'm a married man.'

'Of course you are, Corporal. I know that. Now, drop them.' Bit rough, you may be thinking, but I needed to know I could trust him and I needed him to know he could trust me. 'It's an order.'

'Yes, sir.' He looked at me, head on one side. Then he stood to attention, unlatched his belt and let his trousers fall. I moved forward and pulled his underpants to his knees.

'Corporal Cooper,' I said. 'Pull that skin back.'

'Yes, sir.'

It was very pretty. It started as a little rosette at the tip. As he pulled it back his cock began to fill and stand. Strange how big a short, stocky guy can be. He slipped that foreskin back, over the corona, and the naked glans flared. And he went on slipping it back, further and further, until the frenulum started to pull the tip downward.

'Corporal Cooper,' I said. 'As your Medical Officer, I find your foreskin retracts without any trace of tightness or phimosis. At the moment, I see no reason to recommend you for circumcision. However, that may or may not apply to the soldiers we have to examine, here. And I shall rely heavily on your views in that matter. And perhaps those of Corporal Hussein.'

'You'll find we mostly agree, sir!' I bet I will, I thought.

Then I looked him in the eye. 'Get your kit back on, John. And understand this. You say you're a married man, and we both know exactly what you meant by that. But you like seeing a guy being circumcised.' He was going to protest, but somehow he couldn't, because we both knew it was true. 'Well, maybe I could get to like the idea, too. Funny, I don't think I realised it until a moment or so ago.' As I spoke, he was slipping his foreskin forward again. There was a probe in a tray on the desk, and I leant over and put the cold metal against the rosette that had formed again at the tip of his dick.

'And.' I said, 'before I leave this place, we shall think about that again, you and I.'

He looked at me. 'I think about it a lot,' he said. 'And maybe we'll see if you're right.' Then he remembered, and grinned. 'Sir.' And he fastened his belt, and went out.

On the Monday, he and Cpl. Hussein were there. Monday morning is time for the guys who've done stupid things over the weekend, the guys who have verrucas, the guys who have back-pain. Some of them are for real, some of them just want off duty, some of them want out. I'm a doctor - I used my medical judgment, and I listened to John and Sami.

Sami was from Brum. He and John ran a really smooth operation, and I could see they didn't intend to let me screw it up, which was absolutely fine by me. In the afternoon we had the first batch of new guys. Sami had told me it takes eight minutes to process a recruit - nine is OK, seven means maybe you haven't been thorough. And I knew he was right - I had to be thorough; I'm an officer, I'm responsible. Sixteen times eight minutes is a bit over two hours, so start 1330, finish, well, allow a little slack, Sir, about 1620, maybe 1630. Oh, and Sir?

'Yes, Sami?'

'Corporal Cooper, I believe he spoke to you about some things, Sir?' We weren't going in deep to begin with, I could see.

'John spoke to me about the forms. I said I would rely heavily on you and him.'

'The forms?'

'The little box with the U, the C and the R.'

He smiled. 'Yes, sir. He said you, er, well, checked him out. He said he was afraid you were going to put an R in the box for him.'

'I don't suppose I need to do that for you?'

'Course not, sir.' He grinned. 'My religion. Done when I was a kid.' His eyes said I could see it if I wanted to. I thought, not just yet.

'OK,' I said. 'Send in the first recruit.'

And by twenty-five minutes past four, the first sixteen of them had been passed fit for service. John and Sami and I, we know about things. Her Majesty's fighting forces have to be fit and healthy. We don't see the obese guys, they're weeded out early; so are the guys with the beer gut and the guys who don't pass the cannabis test. We don't see anyone who couldn't pick up a gun and run with it. Or throw a grenade. We don't see guys who can't read, or who can't see a target at seventy-five paces. The guys we see, well, they're nineteen or so, they want to be in the Service, and we are the last hurdle. So, they want us to want them. At least, it was like that then.

So, we redo the tests they did before they got here. Piss in the bottle, read the bottom line, step on the scales. We measure your height, and check the reflex under your kneecap with the hammer. Now, stand in front of me and drop your underpants.

'Try not to get a hard-on.' No, I didn't say that. Aw, cummon, it's a nice idea, but it isn't sensible.

Hold your bits to one side, while I stick two fingers up hard next your balls and tell you to cough. Now, hold them to the other side. You see, I know you're going to pass because I know the guys who checked you out before you got here are as thorough as I am. And John and Sami. We don't take guys with a hernia.

Now pull your foreskin back, if you have one. If not, you get a C in the box, like Sami. If you can get it back, right back, like John, and your cockhead is as clean as his, you get a U. And then, there are the rest of you. So at the end of the afternoon, Sami counted three Cs out of sixteen, and eight Us and four Rs. I saw him shake his head.

'Not enough?'

'Can I say something?'

'Anything. I'm the new boy.'

'Well, if we look at the list, Sir, the three circumcised men are fine. That leaves twelve uncut lads, and only four of them Rs.'

'How many should there be?'

He shrugged. 'All of them, if you ask me, sir.'

'All of them?'

'Circumcision is good for them, it's *right* for them.'

'That's not just your religion?'

'No, sir. I believe in it. It was right for me, and my brothers, and their sons and my sons. And all these boys. It is good. It is right and they won't get it anywhere else, so we should do it for them.'

'Does John think like that?'

'Ask him, sir.' Quite a long time ago I'd noticed the capital letter coming off "sir".

'You mean, he doesn't quite agree.'

'We've talked about it. We *mostly* agree.'

'But not about him, Sami, maybe not about him?'

'Sir, I have to take these forms to the office. The Colonel always looks at them.'

'Sure, Sami. Is John out there? Send him in, will you.'

'Sir!'

He saluted and left. Corporal Cooper was there in what felt like about a millisecond.

'Sir. What was the count?'

'3 C, 8 U, 4 R'

He pursed his lips. 'Permission to speak, sir?'

'Not enough, eh? OK, permission granted.'

'Have you discussed this with the Colonel, sir?'

'Ah. You're telling me I should have?'

'Not exactly. It's just that, well, you put a C in the box, and that's easy, nothing more to say. Or you put a U in the box, and that's the way it is - the recruit is uncircumcised. What happens, sir, if you put an R in the box?'

'It recommends the recruit for circumcision. I mean, that's right, isn't it?'

'That's right, sir. So, what happens next?'

'He gets circumcised.'

'Sir, sir, this is the Army. Things don't just happen. They have to be, sort of, made to happen. Like, the three guys with a C, you and Sami can stop worrying about them. Yes?'

'I suppose so.'

'And Sami will go on worrying about the guys you marked as U, because he wants them trimmed.'

'How do you know that?'

He gave me that look, the one that says 'oh, for fuck sake, you may be an officer but you don't have to be stupid'. Officers are absolutely forbidden to take any notice. This is in Queen's Regulations.

'Sir, I have known Sami for as long as he and I have been in the Service. He wants them *all* trimmed. Full stop. He *told* you that, sir. Sir!'

'OK, John,' I said. 'Let's spend a moment, guy to guy. We're in the Royal Army Medical Corps; we are professionals. So just for a second or so, we are John and David, OK?'

'Just for a second, David?'

'I haven't forgotten. You are a married man. And we are, well, fellow professionals.' He relaxed a little.

I went on. 'OK, Sami wants them all clipped. Actually, I don't have a problem with that, but I don't think it's necessary with these guys. My serious, medical opinion is exactly as I put it on paper. 3 C, 8 U, 4 R.'

'David, I think you've forgotten the Colonel. He runs this place. He gets to see all the forms.'

'The Colonel?' Now I was lost.

'He thinks soldiers go to hot countries. He thinks they get infections under their foreskins. He thinks they should be, well, *his* word is "encouraged", to lose those skins. So he is, sort of, on Sami's side.'

'So what does this do to my list, John?'

'The Colonel will tell you, I expect.' Then there was a sudden change of relationship. 'But for the moment, sir, please keep me off it'.

'For as long as you want, Corporal.' I looked him full in the face. 'But I bet you thought about your skin, all last night.'

'Oh, yes, I thought about it, David.' He said it very softly. Then he saluted, turned on his heel, and left the office. And the phone went. You guessed. Sergeant Bell. In the Colonel's office, please, Captain. No rush. Soon as I could manage. In the Army that is a polite way to say 'Now! Right now!'

There are two kinds of senior officers in the Army. There are those with whom you can disagree, as long as you express yourself in polite army-speak. I thought this guy was the other kind. He was a good-looking middle-aged guy but he had that sort of flinty look. Of course, he told me, he had a policy of never interfering in the medical judgments of the RAMC officers on his strength. When he told me that, he seemed to expect some response, so I looked at him straight and murmured 'Sir?' I find that is the best response to a distinguished senior officer. However, he thought I wouldn't mind a little advice from an old soldier, about what really wasn't exactly a medical thing, more a practical one. British soldiers, especially infantry, often went into hot, dangerous situations. They weren't always able to maintain absolute personal hygiene. He had seen my report forms on the medicals this afternoon. He wondered why I had referred only four recruits as recommended for circumcision.

Now, I was looking at him when he said it. Just as I'd looked at John and Sami. Sami was, let's say, obsessive. He wanted everyone cut because that's what was right. John was a married straight guy but he thought a lot about dick - now, *that's* less uncommon than you might think. Isn't that true, when you think about the married straight guys you know? The Colonel was your old-fashioned, public-school soldier. He wanted what was best for his men. And he'd decided what that was. It was circumcision.

'Sir,' I said, 'I appreciate your advice.' A little crawl never does any harm. 'You understand that on what I'll call strictly medical terms, I believe my judgment is sound - the four I recommended are obvious candidates. On the other hand, you've got, if I may say so, sir, more practical experience. In the field.'

He asked if I had said anything to the men.

'I told the four R guys they were recommended for circumcision and should be prepared for it during their time here. I didn't say anything to the others.'

That was good, apparently. He would issue the appropriate orders, have them done next Thursday, usually best. Meanwhile, about the others, I should talk to Sergeant Bell. Not RAMC, but in charge of this intake. Useful man. Worth listening to. And maybe for the next lot I'd consider his advice. I said I'd certainly do that, Sir. Capital S.

Sgt. Bell was waiting in my office, when I got back. He was a big, fair-haired, blue-eyed guy.

He saluted. 'I believe you've been speaking to the Colonel, Sir.'

'I have indeed, sergeant.'

'He thinks I might be able to assist you, Sir.'

'About the recruits?' I wasn't going to say the word first.

'About the circumcisions, sir. John and Sami will tell you I've had a little success making sure the lads are prepared for them.'

'Hmm!' I thought. 'I bet you have.' Then I said, 'and you are here to change some R's to C's.'

'I'm here to make sure some U's change into C's, sir. As well as the R's, of course.'

'Oh.' I shouldn't have been surprised.

'See, sir, we've got 20% circumcised in the latest batch. That's about average these days. The Colonel wants to improve that average. When you've circumcised the ones with the R, that's still just under 50%. Some of us think 50%'s about right.'

'Does that include you, sergeant?'

He shrugged. 'Not a medic, sir. Not really entitled to a view. But it sounds maybe about right, doesn't it? I'm very happy to use my influence with the lads to get to that sort of figure.'

'And if it had to be higher?'

'I do what the Colonel says, sir.'

'What does he say?'

'He thinks 75% is the minimum. Like say twelve out of sixteen. And of course, sixteen out of sixteen is the ideal.' He gave a big smile. 'I think we've managed that twice or three times. Took a lot of persuading. Certain amount of, well sir, let's call it firmness on my part.'

'I can see you might be quite firm, sergeant. Don't mind me asking, but what's in this for you? Do you get to watch or something?'

'Oh, no, sir. John likes that. A bit too much for a married guy, if you ask me. But I get to see the end results, you might say. In the showers, without seeming to notice, like.'

'OK, sergeant, tell you what. I'll get the R's up above 50%. And I'll circumcise any guy you produce, or maybe I should say any guy that comes and asks me. That should make everyone happy, shouldn't it?'

'Including you, sir?'

'Well,' I said, 'all of this is kind of a surprise to me. But now I think of it, sergeant, as the weeks go by, maybe I shall feel great professional satisfaction the first time we hit 100%. But let's not try for that first time, eh?'

When he'd gone I thought I would just have a word with my guys. After all, I meant it when I said to John we were fellow professionals. Also, they knew this place a lot better than me. I had a sort of little speech ready when they came in.

'OK, I'm a new officer, but you guys have had a day or so to get to know me. First, thanks for the formalities, and of course, we keep them up in public, but in here I don't want any "Permission to speak, Sir?" unless you have a good reason for it. Or saluting, if there's no one else there. Second, You've got this unit running like clockwork, haven't you? Well, I want that to go on. The three of us will make it go on - I want all three of us to have a serious reputation for getting it right, the same one you two already have.'

I paused. 'Third, and this is maybe a bit, um, controversial? How can I put it? We need the lads who come through here to go off to their units fit and healthy. They do weapons training, they do drill, they do sport, they do all sorts of army stuff, route marches, field exercises. I've seen your records, guys, and you were good at that yourselves. Since we are being informal, so was I. That's the really important bit, they get to be fit and healthy. And then, there's a part of that. The Colonel thinks that includes we should circumcise them. Well, I've nothing against that. Trust me, Sami. Only, this isn't World War II, and I need to know - can we do that? Can the Army just do that, just cut a guy? Just because we can?'

'Yes, sir.' That was Sami. He knew he was right.

'You've been talking to Malcolm, haven't you?' That was John, and he knew he was right, too.

'Malcolm?'

'Big Mal. Sergeant Bell.'

'I've been talking to Sgt. Bell, and I've been talking to the Colonel. I think I need to know a bit about Sgt. Bell?'

'Sami? You going to tell the Captain about Malcolm?'

'Ah, well, Captain...'

'David is OK, Sami. Dave is not OK, not ever, but David is OK, here. Because the three of us here are in the same boat, I think.'

'Right. Well, David, Malcolm is a big guy. He is what, John, thirty-four? He does weights and judo and all that stuff, so when you look at him, it's all muscle. Do not get in a fight with him, David, not ever'. Sami smiled. 'Most of the guys who come here are like you said, fit and healthy, maybe nineteen, maybe twenty. He can outmarch them, and outfight them, and outrun them. Some of them are good at sport and stuff. He is better. So they admire him. They respect him.'

'And then?' John spoke softly.

'He takes their skins, doesn't he, John?'

'It's not really right, that, Sami.'

'It's not wrong, John.'

'We're never going to agree on that, Sami.'

'You're still going to watch...'

Corporal Cooper turned and looked at me. 'See, David, like you say, same boat. Sami wants them cut, right? I want to see them cut, how did you know that, David? The Colonel thinks it's good for them. Mal wants their skins.'

'What do you mean, he wants their skins?'

'Ah, he didn't say? He collects foreskins. Captain Benson used to save them for him. Name, rank and number in a little black book. Skins in a bottle of formalin. Every Thursday.'

'Jesus, why did Benson do that?'

'Sami, why'd he do that, do you think?'

And do you know, Sami blushed. It's an interesting colour, a blush on a Brummie Bengali's face. 'You tell him.'

'Well, David, Big Mal was fucking Captain Benson stupid every Thursday evening.'

Ah! Now, there's a thing. Right.

So I said, and I meant it, 'I don't think I should like that. And I don't think you told me that. And I don't think you told me about the book and the bottle.'

'Course not David.' Then, very softly, 'but does he go on getting the skins?'

'I think I didn't want you to ask that question, John.'

'Ah,' said Sami, 'but we need to know the answer, don't we? And we really need it by Thursday. Because that's when the last of Captain Benson's R guys arrive.'

'Oh. How many?'

'Only four, David, 'cause there were eight guys cut already. Big Mal doesn't like that, but it sometimes happens.'

I thought hard about this. I wasn't at all sure about the professional ethics, here. On the other hand...

'You say, don't get into a fight with Sgt. Bell, Sami. What do you say, John?'

'Same thing.'

'And what would happen to the foreskins, otherwise?'

'Incinerated.'

'So there really isn't much of a reason he shouldn't have them? Except that we know he shouldn't. Is there a reason why he *should* have them?'

'So he keeps the turnover up. So the uncut guys get persuaded, maybe pressured into it. See, David, that way, Sami's happy, I'm happy, Big Mal's happy, the Colonel's happy. And so are you, David. Now why is that, I wonder?'

And I gave him the honest answer, or most of it. 'John, a week ago I would have said you are crazy. Sunday, I put a cold steel probe on the tip of your foreskin, and I realised I rather liked the idea of being a circumciser.'

'I noticed,' he said. 'Oh, yes, I noticed.'

And on Thursday, there we were with Big Mal in the outer office, and not four guys, but five. I called him into the surgery where Sami and John were waiting. 'Just checking,' I said, 'I thought we were expecting four.'

'Ah, well, sir, you said you'd look after any guy who asked. And I couldn't see any reason why Private Grant shouldn't ask, so I... I sort of discussed it with him. He wasn't keen at first, sir, but I explained the advantages. So that makes five.'

'We have his signature?'

'Oh, yes, sir. Only, if I may say, sir, maybe you could let him go first, while he's still happy with the idea.'

I looked at my two corporals, and they shrugged. 'Fine, sergeant. Show him in.'

Pte. Grant was a slightly worried-looking lad of nearly twenty with short ginger hair. I had him undress behind the screen. Sami washed him down and I told him to lie on the table. I left him there, naked, for a moment or two, while I had a good look at his genitals. I slipped his foreskin back, and as I had expected, it was as loose as John's had been, maybe looser. I let it come back to cover the glans. 'Hypo!' John was standing on the other side of the table and I took the syringe from him. It was one of the lidocaine-based anaesthetics, I wouldn't use it now. I slipped the needle in under the skin at the base of the shaft, and as I did so I could see his scrotum tightening. It was as if he was going to get a hard on, but not with that amount of nerve block in him he wasn't. I put in three more shots in a circle at the base of the shaft.

Then Sami covered him with a paper sheet. I felt for his genitals through the sheet, then holding them to one side I made a cut in the paper. I could feel he was scared as I made the cut, which was funny, really. I was going to take great care not to do any damage with the scissors, because I wanted him perfect when I circumcised him. I fed his penis through the hole in the paper.

'Scalpel!' John handed it to me and I made a tiny nick in the skin. 'Did you feel that?'

'No, sir.'

'Good.' The nick was just forward of where the cut would be. I put the scalpel in the sterile tray.

'Forceps!' I pulled the foreskin forward through the jaws, so that the little nick on the upper surface was just in front of them. I adjusted it to get a straight line cut, then I closed the jaws. His penis was safe on one side of them, his foreskin very exposed on the other.

'New scalpel! Then hold the forceps in position.' John gave me the scalpel and held the forceps perfectly horizontally. I took the scalpel in my right hand, and the foreskin in my left. You just don't know how sharp those things are. It cut through the skin like butter. We had a newly circumcised recruit.

Now, of course, this is only the first part of a circumcision. There are bleeding points to crush and cauterise, and sutures to put in, but with help from Sami and John we were through in thirty-five minutes. Today I'd have put in more sutures, I think that first result was a bit rough. Well, I know it was. As Sami and John were tidying up, getting ready for the next one, I noticed a transparent phial on a shelf by the door. It contained what seemed to be a foreskin.

By the end of the afternoon there were five.