

## **What does the ICRC Medical Personnel Service Do ?**

“The stillness of the night was broken by groans, by stifled sighs of anguish and suffering. Heart-rending voices kept calling for help. Who could ever describe the agonies of that fearful night . . . There were few doctors, no nurses, no trained medical personnel. Dressings and the most essential medicaments were also lacking.” What Henry Dunant saw on the field of battle caused him to ask the question: “Would it not be possible, in time of peace and quiet, to form relief societies for the purpose of giving care to the wounded in war-time by zealous, devoted and thoroughly qualified volunteers ?”.

These few lines from *A Memory of Solferino* were at the origin of the founding of National Red Cross Societies whilst, alongside them, the military medical services were radically reformed and were soon granted international protection by the first Geneva Convention.

According to the statutes of the International Red Cross, the ICRC “endeavours at all times to ensure the protection of and assistance to military and civilian victims of conflicts and their direct results. It contributes to the preparation and development of medical personnel and medical equipment, in co-operation with the Red Cross organization, the medical services of the armed forces, and other combatant authorities”.

How does the ICRC medical personnel section go about this ? It works, on the one hand, with the National Red Cross Societies of the whole world to organize voluntary medical services in co-operation with the League Nursing Bureau and, on the other hand, it forges links with the medical services of the armed forces in all countries. In addition, it contributes to diffusing the Geneva Conventions among medical personnel. In time of war, the ICRC gives

its support to the medical activities undertaken by National Societies. These Societies, in time of war, civil war or even of internal disorders, must undertake many duties.

The first of these is to take care of the wounded and the sick and also to assist their families. The Red Cross is also active in the recruiting and training of volunteers and also purchases the necessary equipment.

Apart from helping the armed forces' medical services in this way, National Societies contribute to the protection of civilians, the setting up of reception camps for refugees, the prevention of epidemics, and the evacuation of civilians from dangerous areas. They also provide infirmaries and blood transfusion facilities. They assist the public authorities by co-operating with the Central Tracing Agency for prisoners of war in Geneva, *inter alia* for the forwarding of family messages and enquiries for missing persons. In addition, they make up and despatch parcels to war victims.

In recruiting, Red Cross Societies meet with serious difficulties. Although they do have professional doctors, nurses, anaesthetists etc., they must have recourse to a great many assistants who must be trained but who are not always available when required.

Recruiting methods vary from one country to another depending on the way of life, traditions and political system. The shortage of medical personnel in some developing countries, for example, could be offset in part only when women were emancipated and enabled to take part in the countries' social life.

Both professional and auxiliary medical personnel are protected by the Geneva Conventions. That protection extends to the medical equipment and buildings, by virtue of articles 24, 26 and 28 of the First 1949 Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field.

Two essential principles are that workers must be mobilised rapidly and that they must give their assistance in the field promptly. For that reason efforts must be constant if the nations, as recommended by the medical personnel motto, wish "to prepare in time of peace to act in time of war".