

Could the medical profession learn from their army counterparts?

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On my recent trip to India, I met up with a very old friend of mine, someone I have known since my early school days. He's a lovely man and a generous human being. He had served in the Indian army in a very senior position and retired over two decades ago. I have always had huge respect for those who serve in the army, any army, as I am unable to even vaguely comprehend why someone would want to put themselves in the line of fire and sometimes pay the ultimate price. They do this almost happily. It's something I totally fail to understand and I thought a chat with my friend might help me understand where this mindset comes from. It also made me think that perhaps understanding this mindset might help those who serve in the national health service.

Why then do people go above and beyond. He said to me, that he had been very proud to serve in the army, and there were three things that made people take it up, and continue with it. The first was **Naam** (pride in reputation). The other was **Namak** (salt, loyalty to the group), and the third was **Nishaan** (visible symbols of the group – flags, crests, logos, uniforms).

In terms of the name and standing, there are some families for whom enrolling in the army was a tradition, a matter of pride. But for those that came from other backgrounds, this was something that was achieved through their training over a number of years. The pride in their Company, Regiment or Platoon was built up over their years of rigorous training. During this time they would come to realise that the reputation of their group mattered, and a task given to them was accepted as a matter of pride, and

therefore could not be carried out sloppily or left incomplete. It could be as simple as ensuring food supplies being airdropped into a flood hit area to actually save the lives of citizens in danger in peaceful times. During wartime, which wasn't very often, it could be an occasion where they put their life on the line for a task to be completed, an objective to be achieved. It is a matter of taking pride in the reputation of the group.

This training started at a very basic level, but eventually produced soldiers of a certain calibre who thought in a certain way. Not everybody went into the army with the view to sacrifice themselves, but by the time they finished their training, they had ingrained so much discipline and pride in their company, platoon or regiment that if required, they would be willing to sacrifice themselves for the course of achieving a given objective.

The second was about being "true to their salt", to use a well-known phrase. This was about being loyal and faithful. Loyalty came out of the knowledge and confidence that should any of them be killed in action, they were secure in the knowledge that their family would genuinely be looked after by their group. This is because there was an unwritten rule that the senior commander or general would ensure that the members of the family left behind would have adequate financial assistance and support to ensure decent living for the rest of their lives. There could always be situations where other family members would try and usurp the financial aid given to the direct family and it was the duty of the commander to ensure that appropriate justice was done.

Finally, we talked about what happened when the group was given a task. Their only aim would be to complete the task and do it effectively efficiently without rancour, and occasionally even compete with their neighbouring company or regiment. This was healthy competition and not about scoring

points over each other. Reassessment of the task would be carried out at regular intervals, and in the end, it was the company commander who would decide whether completing the task was the required outcome. Risk assessments would be carried out and would take into account whether the costs involved were acceptable, especially when it meant loss of life or limb. The visible symbols of the group would always be displayed with pride at all times.

The path into the army is either direct recruitment as a soldier or as an Officer, the latter being recruited after either Graduate School, a degree or through other channels. Promotion is then along the usual ranks. Soldiers who do not get a promotion, continue as NCOs, retiring at around the age of 35. That is a watershed moment for these gallant men and women, as blending into society can be tricky. One moment you are fighting an enemy, and the next, you have to be a socially adept person. I have always wondered how difficult this must be.

I asked my friend if any of his troops had died under his command and how he managed the situation. He said it was a very difficult time, but it was a time of learning as well. The principal task of a commander is to ensure that his troops are trained so well that they achieve the objectives with no avoidable loss of life or limb, They reviewed how the task had been carried out, had risk assessment been adequate, and whether the troops had been appropriately trained to handle that particular job or not. They also ensured that financial aid offered to the family reached the family itself and was not taken up by others.

I asked him if there were any areas where improvements were required and he mentioned that changes to the method of recruitment of soldiers to the army was made about four years ago in which, of the soldiers selected at the

beginning of training, only 25% of soldiers would be retained at the end of those four years. The remainder would be asked to leave with financial compensation, but nothing else. He was concerned that the groups of the 75% who are not retained in the army should be coming out soon now and the plans for giving them gainful employment were not clearly visible. If they all are not given suitable employment soon after leaving the army, there is a risk that they could be used hired by private contractors. If some of these contractors are involved in unethical practices, this could potentially affect the balance of security in the nation. Of course the advent of AI weaponry might change all the rules, style and type of warfare, but I doubt it would change the basic instinct of those serving in the armed forces.

We talked about whether soldiers all over the world were similar in spirit, and apparently that is how it works. Training, loyalty and sacrifice. All for one and one for all. This is why I thought if medical training for doctors within our health care system had an element of teaching team working, the NHS may become a better place and a more successful system than it is today where most successful individuals get to glory but often pull the ladder up after them. Over two decades and more ago, we used to work in teams, where team working and team spirit played a role in doctor's lives, but those days are long gone. Perhaps going back in one way, putting the success of the team higher than personal success can give us even more effective outcomes for our nation's favourite organisation, the NHS.