

Pioneers in Professional Dietetics – Eleventh in a Series: Louisa May Alcott: Costly Lessons Learned at Union Hotel Hospital

Submitted by Danielle M Torisky, PhD, RDN

Associate Professor, Dietetics Program, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, VA

Young **Louisa May Alcott** (1832–1888) received her family's support in joining the war effort as a civilian hospital volunteer. A first-person account of her travel from Boston to Washington DC to her assigned hospital in Georgetown, and brief experience as a volunteer nurse was published as *Hospital Sketches*, now considered a classic Civil War memoir.¹

At the Union Hotel Hospital², Alcott's duties included patient food service, wound care, assisting surgery, procuring prescriptions and medical supplies; in addition, she wrote letters for soldiers, listened to their stories and experiences – as she put it, “ministering to their minds” (1, p 37) as well as physical needs. With her unique literary style, Alcott captured not only detail about food and diet, but the sensory and emotional experience surrounding selected moments involving her multiple patient care duties. This is what a skilled reporter accomplishes in current times using audiovisual media technology; in the late 19th century – with cameras relatively new and expensive – one's primary tools were pencil, pen and paper; her detailed notes facilitated memory of details years later when she wrote her hospital memoir.

Alcott's initial impression of patient food service was that of a well-coordinated team effort for newly arrived wounded soldiers, transported from the battle at Fredericksburg, VA in December of 1862 (2). Following bathing and wound care, the mass feeding was “...enacted with much success... great trays of bread, meat, soup, and coffee appeared; and both nurses and attendants turned waiters, serving beautiful rations to all who could eat... [the] clash of busy spoons made most inspiring music” (1, p 33). She

also addressed the emotional impact of food and care: “Very welcome seemed the generous meal, after a week of suffering, exposure...as food, warmth, and rest did their pleasant work...” the men soon began to share “...more graphic accounts of the battle and retreat than any paid reporter could have given us” (1, p 34). Alcott appeared to be aware of the value of kind caregiving and listening in addition to proper feeding in the immediate post-trauma period for her patients. Some outcomes were more tragic than others. It was a simple matter to attend to a bearded man with excellent appetite, who needed help sitting up and feeding assistance – and who offered her much gratitude in return (1, p 34). Others were more demanding, less grateful, and others so seriously wounded the prognosis was poor. Noticing a patient who had not eaten his meal, she offered feeding assistance. Graciously he replied, “Thank you, ma'am; I don't think I'll eat again, for I'm shot in the stomach. But I'd like a drink of water, if you aint [sic] too busy.” Louisa hastened to fulfill the request “...but the water pails were gone to be re-filled and it was some time before they reappeared.” By the time she returned with water, her patient had died (1, p 35).

While she frequently noted the dedication of her fellow nurses, it soon became evident that there were serious problems with sanitation, staff living accommodations, ventilation, food quality, and professionalism in the Union Hotel Hospital – nick-named the “Hurly burly house” by locals. Ultimately sub-standard conditions led to extended work shifts for all nurses in the Union Hotel Hospital. One “off-duty” day, she visited the Armory Hospital in Washington, DC, and described



Louisa May Alcott

with some dismay the contrast between the two hospitals. Alcott beheld “...long, clean, warm, and airy wards, built barrack-fashion, with the nurse's room at the end...” (1, p 65). The nurse's station was well-organized and supplied; personnel appeared well-trained in clearly defined duties, rested, and in good spirits. This stood in stark contrast to the “cold, dirty, inconvenient” (1, p 65) rooms in the hotel hospital, whose windows were nailed shut – preventing fresh air ventilation and intensifying noxious odors throughout. Both hospitals were run by the army, but the Armory Square Hospital was a newly-built hospital in 1862³. She astutely concluded, “Here, order, method, and common sense, and liberality seemed to rule in a style that did one's heart good to see; at the Hurly burly Hotel, disorder, discomfort, bad management, and no

visible head, reduced things to a condition which I despair of describing" (1, pp 65-66). She noted elsewhere that hotel hospital's ward attendants were "incompetent" convalescent soldiers who were pressed into duty, many of them still suffering from injuries. When they became over-taxed, the "sisterhood" of nurses were expected to do the extra work, compromising overall effectiveness of care (1, p 68).

The chaos of the hotel hospital also found its way into foodservice for hospital staff, as vividly described by Louisa: "...is not the following bill of fare [in need of] improvement...? The three meals...consisted of beef, evidently put down for the men of [1776]; pork, just in from the street, army bread, composed of saw-dust and saleratus [author's note: this is baking soda]; butter, salt... stewed blackberries, so much like preserved cockroaches... coffee, mild and muddy...tea, three dried huckleberry leaves to a quart of water – flavored with lime...unconscious of any approach to clearness" (1, pp 62-63). Poor food quality was compounded with the disorderly "stampede" by staff as soon as the dinner bell rang. Arriving just few minutes too late due to patient care would result in being "reduced to bread and water" (1, p 63) or missing dinner altogether. Any food she bought herself at market could not be stored in her room due to rats or insects (1, p 64).

All of this must have taken its toll. Alcott had only worked in the hospital one month before falling ill with a bronchial ailment, along with "a sharp tussle with typhoid" (1, p 78). Even so, she expressed appreciation for how her fellow nurses cared for her, the daily visits from doctors to rule out pneumonia (1, p 77), and

get-well messages from soldiers who had received her care. She later reflected, "...one of the best methods of fitting oneself to be a nurse in a hospital, is to be a patient there" (1, p 77) "...one may live and learn much in one month. A good fit of illness proves the value of health" (1, p 78); she considered it an unforgettable, character-building experience. Within another month or so, Louisa's father came to take her back home to recover her health. The *Hospital Sketches* memoir is valuable to dietetics history research, and confirms accounts of numerous participant observers who wrote about faced similar obstacles to effective health care during the Civil War. It is generally believed that the experience influenced Alcott's later writing, including *Little Women*.

Of importance to professional dietetics, what emerges clearly from Alcott's account is confirmation that deficiencies in hospital and food service management and professionalism had adverse impact on patients – but also compromised health and effectiveness of the very staff who had come to serve the sick and wounded. Louisa's brief nursing service might have been extended, had she been assigned to a properly managed hospital.

For those who wish to read an online PDF version of Alcott's work, one is available through University of Pennsylvania's digital library⁴. A more complete collection of Alcott's letters and journals are housed in the University of Pennsylvania digital library⁵. A list of historical medical sites for touring in the Washington DC area is available at NIH US Library of Medicine website⁶, and includes the Armory Square Hospital.

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