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The Role of the Physician: Eugene Sanger and a Standard of Care at the Elmira Prison Camp

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Abstract

The conduct of American military physicians in prisoner of war (POW) camps has been called into question by the abuse scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay. This essay explores the experiences of the first U.S. military physicians to confront POW patients in large numbers—events that

occurred during the American Civil War. While POWs received sub-standard care in camps north and south, the war also saw the issuance of the first document to outline the rights of POWs. This ambivalence toward the proper care and treatment of the POW is evident in the career of Dr. Eugene Sanger, the first Union surgeon at the prison camp in Elmira, New York. Sanger demonstrated both concern about the sanitary condition of the camp and pride in the deaths of POWs as furthering the overall war aims. His cruelty attracted some censure, but Sanger never faced disciplinary action. He was honorably discharged and went on to become the Surgeon General of his home state. This article places his actions at Elmira in the context of medical ethics, Army orders, and Northern opinion in 1864, and it will argue that the lack of Federal response to Eugene Sanger's poor record while serving at the prison set a precedent for inferior medical care of POWs by American military physicians.

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