

NOTES FROM SOMALILAND.

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THE following notes are put together under the somewhat unique conditions of field service in Somaliland. They may be, possibly, of some interest to readers of our Journal, especially as they refer mainly to the art and practice of surgery among the Somalis, who in many ways are a very strange people with stranger manners and customs. The men are probably the most conceited of mankind, though what they have to be conceited about is not very apparent. As a rule they are ugly, even for blacks, and are skinny and of poor physique with little muscular development. On the other hand, their women are strong and well developed and, when young, plump and comely. The men do not work, the little work that has to be done, such as loading up camels, carrying water, &c., is done by the women, while the men lie under a tree looking on. The men are all armed with spears—one for throwing and one for stabbing; these weapons no doubt help to subdue the “weaker” sex.

I have met several Somalis who have had surgical operations performed on them by their friends. One case, a transport man at Bohotle, had had his leg amputated by the Somali method. He had been kicked by a camel, and from his description I concluded he had sustained a compound fracture of the tibia, which had suppurated. His friends, having assembled a “Punch” (meeting), decided that an amputation was necessary and proceeded to remove the leg by the following method: The patient was tied on the ground with ropes, his hands being secured behind his back, then the anæsthetist proceeded to deal him a heavy blow on the back of the head with a log of wood, which they say “make him sleep,” and certainly would have the effect of rendering him insensible to pain. The operator next proceeded to cut off the leg with a spear head, rubbing in ashes and binding on leaves tightly to stop the bleeding. The patient did not regain consciousness for some hours after the operation was completed. When I saw the man at Bohotle he was well and going about on a crutch; the operation had produced a very pointed stump with a piece of bone protruding. The leg had been taken off six inches below the knee joint, evidently at the seat of fracture.

It is quite common to see men with very large scars on their heads; some of these are cases which have been operated on for depressed fracture. If a man gets a heavy blow on the head, and does not recover consciousness for some days, his friends do an operation exposing the bone and raising up the broken piece, quite appreciating the dangers of a depressed fragment. They do all their operations with spear heads.

Daughters are a source of great wealth to their fathers, for when a Somali marries he has to pay the parent in camels and goats a price, varying with the good looks and features of the girl—fifteen to thirty camels with some goats is an average price. Somalis draw a great distinction between married and unmarried women; the outward sign being the manner in which the hair is worn, thus, a virgin wearing the hair “down” and a married woman “up” on her head, while if she has had a child the hair is worn in a blue bag. A peculiar, and it would appear a very necessary, operation is performed on all Somali girls when they are three or four years old. This consists in sewing up the vagina; the labia majora are brought together by means of sutures, either of plaited horse hair or of sheep’s tendon. I had an opportunity of verifying this not long ago; a girl from a neighbouring *karia*, or collection of huts, came in to our camp and complained that two Somali mounted infantrymen had assaulted her while minding her sheep; they both denied having touched her. I was requested to make an examination to clear up the matter. The condition was what one would be led to expect, namely, a partial occlusion of the vulva, the labia majora having grown together along their posterior half, the anterior portion being patent but showing small scars where the sutures had been. The day before the marriage ceremony a second operation is carried out, usually by a *midgan* or *mistri*, the stitches are cut through and all adhesions treated in a similar manner, the instrument used being the usual spear head. The unfortunate patients are said not infrequently to die as the result of this procedure.

A Somali usually carries a permanent medical history about with him, in many ways as useful as the authorised written sheet. Whenever he feels pain in any part of his body a hot spear head is immediately applied to the part, and should there be no relief in a day or so, the iron is again applied to the same spot. The result being that their bodies are covered with scars—some slight and showing that the pain had not been severe or of long duration, others consisting of regular keloid growths, sometimes raised half an inch above the skin. In one case, which I happened to observe

some days ago, the left side was covered with keloid and large scars which corresponded fairly accurately with the lower lobe of the left lung, and from the man's description I gathered that he had suffered from pneumonia involving the lower part of his left lung.

When Somalis have been on plain meat diet for any length of time they always bleed themselves; this they do by cutting the veins under the tongue. They, apparently, are not subject to any infectious diseases, and enteric is unknown amongst them. These notes are doubtless crude, but they afford an interesting insight into the present position of surgery among a far from uninteresting people.