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Blog post

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Burns Awareness Day blog

On 13 October 2017, I attended the fifth annual Woundcare4Heroes conference in London, where I was invited to speak on identity and burns through history. Although the Forged by Fire team are organising our own events in 2018 and 2019 on 'Anonymity' and 'Heroism', this invitation provided a timely opportunity to think about the way we have conceptualised 'identity' in a project that is subtitled 'Burns Injury and British *Identity*, 1800-2000'. To an audience comprising primarily of nurses, I addressed the identity of burns wounds themselves, that of practitioners who treated burns injuries and, most importantly, burns patients over the last two centuries.

Conference participants were aware of the way in which burns have the potential to transform identity. Just how much burns wounds have changed from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century was perhaps less evident, but is described here. What was also emphasised was that, just as burns transformed between 1800 and 2000, so too did burns practitioners as a group professionalise and emerge as highly skilled members of multidisciplinary teams by the end of the Second World War. Most often associated with work undertaken by Harold Gillies in Basingstoke and Archie McIndoe's burns team at East Grinstead, their efforts similarly transformed the identities of small, rural hospitals; the 'cottage' was removed from the official title of Queen Victoria Hospital in East Grinstead in 1943. The Sussex town itself underwent a change in its identity, better known as 'The town that did not stare' into the immediate post-war period. Autobiographies of 'heroic' surgeons appeared soon after the war's conclusion, most describing the careers of these surgical outsiders made leaders of an internationally-recognised medical speciality. These were outnumbered by biographies of members of the so-called 'Guinea Pig Club', which recount the support afforded to the injured airmen by the inhabitants of East Grinstead, and how these 'wounded warriors' in turn helped other burns survivors come to terms with their injuries.

If only all people with burns could have experienced the support and rehabilitation that the Guinea Pig Club did in the early 1940s. Despite their great numbers, the inspirational biographies of wounded airmen were vastly outnumbered by negative depictions of burns in popular culture, with many famous villains from The Joker to Freddy Krueger being marked with burns to signify their evil natures. In his autobiography *Changing Faces*, James Partridge laments that it took so long for another generation of burns patients to benefit from support networks that resembled the Guinea Pig Club. Collective healing, when it has reappeared, has most often been experienced by those injured during disasters, as occurred following the 1988 Piper Alpha oil rig fire, for example. Since the 1970s, however, such patient groups re-emerged, first in North America with the establishment of the Phoenix Society, and in the UK more recently, and the stigma of burns injuries been challenged. Since the 1990s, like people with cancer, individuals with burns have begun to refer to themselves as survivors, distancing themselves from a discourse of 'victimhood'. This language has been incorporated into patient autobiographies, and shaped identities. The variety of survivor biographies should also remind us that the experiences of those with burns are indeed diverse. Identities are often unique, and the impact of burns on individual identity invariably depends on a variety factors such as the age at which one has been burned, the location on the body of the burn, as well as the material that caused the burns.

Despite the recent proliferation of burns survivor stories, there are still many absent voices. The biographies of the Second World-War Guinea Pigs have been joined by inspiring life stories from the founders of burns charities, including those published by Katie Piper and James Partridge. Simon Weston, like the original Guinea Pigs, has not only published autobiographies and delivered countless public lectures, but continues to offer his services to the wider burns community. However, the public remains less familiar with the testimonies of others with burns experiences, including nurses and social workers on professional teams, as well as the survivors of more recent tragedies, such as the 1981 New Cross Fire. In the next stage of our project, we aim to interview some of these individuals and add their voices to existing practitioner and survivor narratives. Like the powerful texts already highlighted, these will surely demonstrate that the language used to describe burns is often alienating, but, as many have come to realise, it can also be liberating. As part of National Burns Awareness Day, on 18th October 2017, and as part of this project more generally, we are committed to disseminating the stories which facilitate the latter.