

Ettie Rout - WW1 Safe Sex Advocate



Censored by the New Zealand cabinet, referred to in the House of Lords as the “most wicked women in Britain”, Ettie Rout was also hailed as the “guardian angel of the ANZAC’s” and an “unforgettable heroine” (H.G. Wells) ¹. Her determination to prevent the spread of venereal disease (VD) can allow her to be hailed as one of the earliest health promoters.

Born in Launceston, Tasmania, 24 February 1877, Ettie Rout moved to New Zealand with her family in 1884.

The outbreak of War gave Ettie Rout and her New Zealand Volunteer Sisters, a group of women aged 30-50, a theatre of operations more appropriate to her sense of mission. In the spirit of the ‘universal mother’ Rout believed NZ Women should go with the men and look after them. This was at a time when the New Zealand Government would not even permit nurses to deploy².



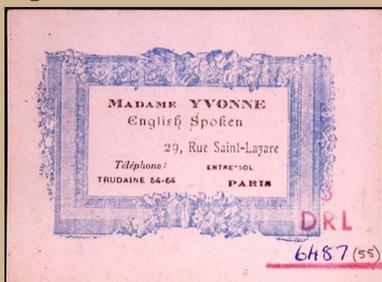
Ettie with her Volunteer Sisterhood, Oct 1915. Ettie is the one in the centre without a hat. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand ⁸.

On arriving in Egypt in early 1916, she found the NZ authorities in a dilemma about the soaring rates of VD. After touring the prostitute precinct in Cairo noted to have over 20,000 prostitutes ³ she concluded that, since moral prophylaxis was manifestly ineffective, the only realistic approach was to make proper, safe provisions for the sexual needs of the men ⁴. She noted “wherever society fails to make provision for normal sexual desires of the average man, endless trouble results” ³.

She viewed the issue of VD as a medical, not a moral, problem and one that should be approached as any other disease, with all available preventable measures. She recommended the issue of prophylactic kits and the establishment of inspected brothels, and tried to persuade the New Zealand Medical Corp (NZMC) to adopt this view, with no success ⁵.

In June 1917 the VD problem was still unresolved, so she went to London to push the New Zealand Medical Corps into adopting prophylactic measures. She combined the work of several researchers to produce her own prophylactic kit, containing calomel ointment, condoms and potassium permanganate (Condy's crystals). She sold these at the New Zealand Medical Soldiers Club, which she set up at Hornchurch near the New Zealand Convalescent Hospital.

New Zealand troops in Egypt and later in London and Paris, could not resist the temptations of the flesh. Soldiers on leave in England and France were eager for women ¹. In 1918 Rout added a further dynamic to her brothels. These were against the law in England, so she found a madam who would supervise her brothel it was run on “safe sex” lines.



Madame Yvonne’s mansion, 29 Rue Saint-Lazare, made safe and suitable provision for the sexual needs of the troops ².

After the armistice in 1919 Rout returned to France and ran an American Red Cross station in the ruined Somme town of Villers Brettoneux where she fed over 200 children a hot midday meal, and operated a canteen for the British war graves detachments in the Western Front ².

She was awarded the Médaille de la Reconnaissance Française, (The medal of French Gratitude) which is solely awarded to civilians ².



“To no woman has it been permitted to do the same amount of good, and to save more misery and suffering, both during and after the war, than to Miss Ettie Rout. Not only has Miss Ettie Rout the qualities that characterise all great humanitarians, but she also possesses, in a unique degree, an intimate knowledge of the terrible troubles that arise from intercourse, and of the manner in which they can be reduced and perhaps eliminated.”

Sir William Arbuthnot Lane, Consulting Surgeon to Guy’s Hospital, London, 1922 ⁴.

There is no other reference hinting at the enormous debt legions of New Zealand servicemen owed Ettie Rout as their wartime lifesaver. For without the courage and tenacity of the sexual health pioneer, (a French doctor hailed her as the “guardian angel of the Anzacs”), even more soldiers might have succumbed to rampant venereal diseases¹.

She became persona non grata in New Zealand and her many publications were banned. She did return to New Zealand briefly and died in Rarotonga on 17 September 1936 aged 59 of an accidental overdose of quinine, which she had taken during recurring malaria attacks since her time in Egypt, She is buried in the graveyard of the London missionary Society church (now the Cook Islands Christian Church) at Avarua.

Venereal Disease

In 1915, 445 New Zealand soldiers were diagnosed with VD (equivalent to ½ an infantry battalion) ⁶. A 1919 NZEF memorandum estimated that 12,000 to 13,000 men contracted VD during the First World War. The loss of effectiveness of these men and the shame associated with contracting the “clap” and being returned home and segregated, weighed heavily on both the NZDF and the affected soldiers, officers, as well as officials back in New Zealand.

Ettie Rout reported to The British Medical Journal (BMJ) “thus the New Zealand Division’s experience corroborated that of the Australian Division, in that 60% of infections [VD] came from London, but with the development of disinfection achieved in France we were within measurable distance of reducing VD to negligible quantity” ⁷. It is clear that Ettie Rout’s tenacious efforts to counter the effects of VD greatly reduced the infection rates.

References

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