



Sick Berth Attendants

History

The Medical Assistant¹ was previously known as Sick Berth Attendant and Sick berth Steward (19th-20th centuries) and earlier as [loblolly boy](#) (16th–19th centuries). Medical Assistants are colloquially known as "scablifters" or "doc" in Royal Naval JackSpeak. The Sick Berth Branch of the Royal Navy can said to have originated in 1833 when a directive was issued to Commanding Officers to organize a "Sick Berth Attendant" category of naval rating in each ship¹ They received no formal medical training and it was not until June 1883 that a Committee, known as the Hoskins Committee, after its Chairman, Rear Admiral A. H. Hoskins was formed to enquire into the organization and training of the Sick Berth and Nursing Staff of the Royal Navy Hospitals. The Committee, after visiting Naval and Military Hospitals as well as the larger London Hospitals reported their findings to the Admiralty in the autumn of 1884. The Admiralty gave their verdict in an Order in Council dated October 17, 1884.¹ This Order authorised the establishment of a trained Sick Berth Rating Staff with the following Rates:

The Order also supported the formation of trained female nursing staff in naval hospitals, which in 1902 was to become the Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service.

In 1891 Sick Berth personnel received a new style of uniform. Instead of the blue serge jumper, blue cloth collar and bell bottom trousers, known as 'Square Rig, they received a single or double breasted jacket and trousers with black buttons, red badges and a peaked cap. This was known as 'fore and aft' rig, and issued to 'all ratings not dressed as seamen. This uniform was also issued to tradesmen known as "Artificers", who were collectively known as "Tiffies". So it was natural that sick berth attendants were also known as "Sick Berth Tiffies".

In 1920, the term Steward was dropped in favour of Petty Officer. Another major change took place in 1965 which affected the Royal Navy as a whole

when the "Fore and Aft" rig was abolished in favour of the "Square Rig". Also in 1965 the term Medical Assistant replaced Sick Berth, and so it remains to this day¹