

## **Irene Olive Eldridge**

**Isle of Wight County Press 11 November 1944**

### **NEWPORT NURSE'S DEATH FROM TETANUS.**

#### **AN UNUSUAL CASE**

The unusual story of how a young Newport nurse fell among a bed of dead flowers and contracted tetanus by a stalk piercing her leg, and died at the County Hospital on Saturday, was told at an inquest held at the hospital on Thursday held by the Acting Coroner (H. E. A. Webster, Esq.). The deceased was Mrs. Irene Olive Eldridge, aged 23, New Street, Newport, wife of Austin Eldridge, employed at Messrs. Saunders-Roe's. Police Inspector F. Rugman was present.

Mrs. Josephine Elliott, 25 Newport Street, Newport, said deceased, her sister, was employed as a nurse at the County Mental Hospital, and lived with her. Early in October she was taken ill at work, and came home. She was treated for tonsillitis and enteritis but that was definitely cleared up. At about 1.40 pm on October 21st she had washing in the garden, and with deceased, went to see to the clothes line. Her sister wanted to release the line, and let the end fall to the ground. She climbed up to put it back, but the iron bedstead on which she had placed her foot gave way and she fell. She got up all right, but found she had a large splinter in her leg, just above her right knee. Witness telephoned for the doctor who removed it. Stitches were put in. Her sister got up on October 26th, but on October 30th she complained of stiffness in her shoulder, and they thought it was the result of a draught. She had pain on the following day, and went to her sister's home at Porchfield to recuperate.

Mrs. Nora Bessie Barlow, of Sportsman's Rest Cottage, Porchfield, said her sister arrived on October 31st. She saw the splinter in her leg, caused by a marigold stalk. At Porchfield deceased seemed in good spirits. Next evening she said her back hurt, and she had a little stiffness in the jaw, and went to bed. On November 2nd she was much worse, and had a job to stand on getting out of bed. The stiffness was still in her back and neck. She said she did not feel like having anything to eat or drink.

Dr. Aubrey A. Heathcote, of Newport, said deceased had run a splinter about two inches long under the skin of her right leg. He removed two big pieces and one small piece, and probed around to see if he could find anything else. He washed out the wound with antiseptic and applied three stitches. The splinters were old black fragments of plant. Nurse Cooper did the dressing. On October 25th there was nothing wrong with her general condition, but a little redness round the wound, which was not unusual. On October 27th he removed the stitches and the wound was septic, but that did not surprise him as wounds were often like that. Deceased, who visited him on October 31st, was walking quite well, and seemed her normal self; and the wound appeared going on all right. On November 2nd Mrs. Barlow telephoned that deceased was complaining of stiffness in the back and jaw. He went straight to deceased, and it came into his mind that she might have contracted tetanus. He took her to the County-hall, and from there, on his advice, she was removed to the County Hospital.

The Coroner: Does it surprise you that she died of tetanus? - Dr. Heathcote said it did, because there was no sign of any contamination from the soil. It was surprising that tetanus bacilli should have been found in the stem of a plant. It was usually found in the earth, and was caused by direct contact of an open wound with the soil. He had only known of tetanus being contracted in that way. When he first saw deceased he did not consider giving anti-tetanus injections. Dr. Giles Keane (County Hospital house surgeon) said that when deceased was admitted he understood that tetanus was suspected. Deceased could not open her mouth very far. He diagnosed tetanus, and gave her 20,000 units of anti-tetanus serum. Altogether 480,000 units were given, but it was no good.

By the Coroner: It had not been proved that they were of no use. Tetanus was a very virulent germ, liable to take charge. He removed a small piece of twig from the wound, and the anti-tetanic treatment continued. Later deceased had convulsions and was given sedatives. He had never heard of tetanus being contracted apart from soil contamination, and he was surprised that it should have come from a marigold stalk. It occasionally occurred as a result of contact with surgical gloves and instruments even after heat treatment.

The Coroner: Supposing you had been in Dr. Heathcote's place, would you have given anti-tetanus injections? - Dr. Keane: If the twig in my opinion had any earth on it I should have given anti-tetanus injections. - The Coroner: That would be the rule of the medical profession? - Dr. Keane: Not exactly the rule, but the usual procedure.- The Coroner: It would be a matter of discretion? - Dr. Keane agreed.

Dr. Heathcote said that when he examined the wound there were no signs of soil contamination.

Mrs. Elliott recalled, said the marigolds had been in the garden for at least three years. Her sister fell among the stalks. The garden had not been manured for about three years.

The Coroner returned a verdict of death by misadventure from tetanus infection, contracted when she fell on October 21st. He said that his personal opinion was that this was one of these cases where infection from tetanus was unusual. It was well known that infection came in most cases from direct contact with the ground. He expressed condolence with the relatives in this most unfortunate event.

*Transcription by Kate MacDonell for the Friends of Newport and Carisbrooke Cemeteries, © 2025 <https://www.foncc.org.uk>*