

An Army Veteran and His Incredible Case of Rheumatoid Arthritis and Spondylitis

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Peter Cluckey was able to feed himself for the last time on August 3, 1912, after his jaw became so fused that he was unable to open his mouth more than an inch. At his autopsy in 1925, the pathologist described the 43-year-old man's body as emaciated "with subcutaneous fat practically absent."¹

Cluckey, an Army veteran who served in the Philippines after the Spanish–American War, had been battling severe ankylosing rheumatoid arthritis and spondylitis since first diagnosed in 1904.

Two months after his second Army enlistment, Cluckey experienced joint pain and stiffness after a horseback-mounted drill held in a cold rain. He endured several medical examinations and was diagnosed with "rheumatism chronic, articular, affecting both hips, knees, and ankle joints, and the right elbow."

He was treated twice at the Army and Navy General Hospital in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1904–1905 and 1909–1910, with sodium salicylate, potassium iodide, hydrotherapy, and other methods. He was admitted in May 1910 to the U.S. Soldier's Home in Washington, DC, now the Armed

Forces Retirement Home, where he lived out the remainder of his life.



FIGURE 1. Skeleton of Peter Cluckey, photographed at the Army Medical Museum (today's National Museum of Health and Medicine) in the mid-20th century. (Courtesy National Museum of Health and Medicine, Silver Spring, MD).

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Despite a variety of treatments over the next 15 years, his condition worsened to the point where every joint in his body was ankylosed, according to an exhaustive review of his medical records.¹ Cluckey was given a special chair in which he could sit comfortably for hours at a time and in which he could attend movies. Four front teeth were removed on February 4, 1921 so that he could be fed soft foods.

Cluckey died on September 10, 1925 at the age of 43. Cause of death was difficult to determine at autopsy, but opiate abuse and poor nutrition were noted as factors and his lungs revealed signs of early bronchopneumonia.

Cluckey willed his remains to the Army Medical Museum. He had been helpless for so long that he volunteered to give his body to the museum (today's National Museum of Health

and Medicine) in the hope that a study of his disease might help others. The skeleton, which has been on display in a wooden chair since Cluckey's death (Fig. 1), features most of its original bones, and the skeleton is seen in photographs of the museum back to the 1930s. The solid bony ankylosis of every joint is readily visible to museum patrons when viewing the skeleton which remains a fixture of the museum's exhibit on pathology.

REFERENCE

1. Gilmore HR Jr, Stecher RM: Rheumatoid arthritis and spondylitis; the clinical history and the pathological changes after twenty years of disability. *Mil Med* 1955; 117(5): 432-8.