

Old-Fashioned Remedies

in

New Brunswick



For:
Dr. G. Duff

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By:
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Each era since the beginning of time
can be noted for its own characteristic
use of medicine and, in the late 1800's
and early 1900's, New Brunswick was
certainly no exception as we shall come
to understand

When talking to older people even now the virtues of old-time remedies are frequently dwelt upon. In this essay a few of the more popular and sometimes peculiar remedies sworn by in New Brunswick during the late 1800's and early 1900's, will be accounted.

One particularly interesting batch of remedies were accounted in the SMT Family Almanac, a circular which was widely subscribed to in New Brunswick. These remedies were collectively called the Red Flannel Cures, a name which, as we shall come to see, is very appropriate.

It seemed that the acceptable method of curing a sore throat in the Eighties was to apply a strip of raw pork on a red flannel bandage; it had to be red flannel otherwise the cure was useless. This was put around the sufferer's neck until it was solemnly avowed that the pain had disappeared. Red flannel was everywhere—even chest protectors of this material were worn by every member of the family when going out in severe weather.

As red flannel found an acceptable place in the family of the Eighties, so did a number of original and rather freakish prescriptions, all of which are quite unusual by today's standards.

More home remedies were recalled by the author of a column in The Daily Gleaner of Saint John, 190?. A common remedy for throat ailments, in particular "quinsy", which is an abscess around a tonsil, was to tie a black silk ribbon around the neck of the afflicted person. The significance of the colour black seemed very important and was associated with preservatives and colds. A more elaborate treatment would consist of boring a hole through a nutmeg and suspending it around the neck by a silk thread. Quinsy now goes by the name of strep throat and is treated with antibiotics, however there was once a belief that the third attack of quinsy was invariably fatal.

Hoarseness in the throat was treated by rubbing the soles

of the feet with garlic and lard which were well beaten together or to boil a handful of wheat bran in a quart of water sweeten it with honey and sip it frequently.

In the pre-sulfa days mustard plasters were a standard remedy for chest ailments like pneumonia. Although there was controversy as to whether a hot or cold regimen should be followed, many a patient was left caring for painful blisters.

For the croup marked by a barking cough and hoarseness—a plaster spread with tallow from a candle & Scotch snuff was applied to the chest.

An effective cure for consumptive cough was prepared using 4 oz. of rosemary, 4 oz. balm, 4 oz. marshmallows (a thickening agent perhaps?), 4 oz. white horehound and 4 oz. peppermint oil all of which were put in five quarts of water and boiled down to four quarts. The mixture was then strained and one pound of treacle, \ pint vinegar (or two drams of ginger), two drams of paregoric and four ounces of loaf sugar were added to sweeten. This mixture would be taken while warm.

Another time-worn preparation was a mixture prepared for asthmatic cough. It consisted of one pound of fresh butter, one pound of treacle, one glass of vinegar, one ounce of garlic and radish all simmered together and Spanish licorice added to taste. The dose called for one wineglassful to be taken three times daily while many an oldtimer claimed that the effectiveness of this preparation was definitely aided by a few stiff shots of whiskey.

Concerning the treatment of fever and ague, which was malarial fever, the patient would often take a gill of very strong coffee with an equal quantity of lime juice, and preferably just before the fit of ague was expected. High fever with delirium was often cured by applying a plaster of treacle to the top of the head and also to the wrists and soles of the feet when the head was not affected.

Dr. Lindsay, of Washington, a noted physician of the day, recommended for treatment of scarlet fever that a piece of bacon should be rubbed over the body of the afflicted person.

What is treacle

The rubbing would be done day and night and thoroughly performed so that a covering of fat would result.

Another treatment for scarlet fever was Bromo-chloralum, which was indicated for both internal and external use. Its list of virtues included its use as a gargle for the throat, an internal antiseptic, a wash for the person, and last, but certainly not least, a disinfectant for the house. Where the patient's breath was foul and the air in the house was subsequently foul, the remedy was to be exposed on clothes or suspended in the room over the doorway so that air passing in and out of the sick room would be filtered through the "Bromo-strainer". Its purifying effect on the atmosphere in the sick room would result in abortion of the disease and the air passing into the other rooms would no longer carry a potent virus.

Besides all of these beneficial effects, Bromo-chloralum was entirely free from caustic properties. It had no odor of its own but removed all offensive odors when sprinkled and its vapor had no irritating property "even to the weakest lung". It was also a thorough and perfect disinfectant, destroying not by corrosion but by its antiseptic quality all fungi and germs of disease. It could be applied in a dilute form to ulcers, sores, gangrened wounds and catarrhal inflammations of the mucous membrane and air passages. It was also quite effective as a gargle and, if taken internally, had an alterative and stimulating effect.

Of course, we cannot forget ailments of the stomach which are always common complaints. One remedy for a sick stomach particularly when accompanied by vomiting, was a liquid prepared by steeping black cherries in water.

One product which was advertised in New Brunswick daily newspapers was called Ingluvin. It was prepared from the gizzard of domestic fowl. Ingluvin was used originally as a remedy for vomiting during pregnancy. This medicine was administered orally as a powder and its use was indicated for indigestion in its various forms and for sick stomach or nausea caused by debility of that organ.

Another common ailment was wind in the stomach, today known as gas. A preparation consisting of 4 oz. of caroy was boiled in two quarts of water down to one. This would be strained and one dram of red lavender, one ounce of cream of tartar, one dram of roach alum, four ounces of honey and six eggshells (finely powdered) would be added to the quart of caroy water and brought to a boil.

The value of tea leaves as a burn treatment was known in the country districts before it was scientifically established that the tannic acid in tea leaves had a curative effect on burns. Another treatment consisted of the scrapings from raw potatoes applied to the skin and changed frequently. It was widely acclaimed as a treatment that would draw fire out and prevent blistering.

One smokey treatment guaranteed to prevent both excessive bleeding and blood poisoning resulting from cuts consisted of a mixture of sugar and sheep's wool. These substances were thrown on hot coals and the cut was held over the resulting smoke.

To soothe inflamed eyelids one would beat up the whites of an egg with two teaspoonsful of rosewater into a froth, and apply this on a fine rag. The rag would be changed frequently until the eyelid was well. The preparation was sold commercially as Lingleton's Ointment^(C).

Many persons are unable to sleep due to nervous complaints. In the 1800's insomniacs would have cloths dipped in cold water applied to the forehead for two hours. An alternative solution would be to take a grain or two of camphor as it was considered safer and more effective than aspirin. However, when using the cold bath treatment for such disorders, the person was instructed to go to bed immediately and sweat.

Two handfuls of the green or inner bark of the white elder steeped in two quarts of Lisbon white wine for twenty-four hours was a sure cure for dropsy. This condition of abnormal accumulation of serous fluid in body cavities was supposedly soothed by taking two gills (or more if the patient could bear it) of

the concoction. If more convenient part could be taken in the morning and part at noon after fasting, the idea being that it was best taken on an empty stomach.

The pain of a toothache was soothed by placing baking soda in the tooth cavity then applying a heated iron or plate wrapped in flannel to the cheek. In other parts of the province two drams of alum were reduced to an impalpable powder, mixed with seven drams of nitrous spirit of ether and applied to the tooth.

A tea made from dried marigold blossoms was held to be an excellent cure for yellow jaundice in babies and young children. Some foods used in home remedies were chosen on the basis of color, shape, name and sometimes smell. This can be seen in another treatment for yellow jaundice. Small cakes of yellow cornmeal were baked and placed in the diaper of the afflicted baby. After becoming saturated with urine, the cakes were burned in the stove ~~o~~t fireplace and the jaundice with them.

Skin eruptions were treated with dandelion greens and earaches with baked onion. Sprains were wrapped with turpentine soaked bandages while for bee and hornet stings the simple remedy was applica^{w/v p}tion of mud.

Two grains of camphor in about ten of nitric acid and ten of sugar proved a good anti-hysterical medicine. In the case of an epileptic seizure, a few grains of coarse salt were forced into the mouth of the afflicted person.

Gout in the hand and foot was treated by applying raw lean beefsteak to the area, changing it every twelve hours until relieved.

Skin irritated by nettle rash was rubbed strongly with parsley and itch was relieved by washing with strong rum. A case of hiccups was cured by a taste of three drops of oil of cinnamon and a lump of sugar.

After reading several old newspaper articles it seems apparent that, in Saint John at least, druggists were once in popular demand by civic government. The drugstore of Mr. Thomas M. Reid, for example made a specialty of cod liver oil

which he refined, himself and which he called " an effectual remedy for consumption as well as coughs and colds and all diseases of the lung".

All newspaper advertisements devoted at least one paragraph to listing the virtues of the remedy, often describing it as the most effectual, safe and pleasant cure for several related or unrelated conditions. Another common form of advertisement was a testimonial letter written by a satisfied customer.

Another popular cure all heralded in New Brunswick newspapers went as follows:

The Virtues and Effects
of the Remedy Named

MEDIGAMENTUM GRACIA PROBATUM

ID EST

"The Remedy Approved By Grace"

This medicine was said to work miracles with everyone who made use of it. The patient was instructed to take fifteen drops of this remedy after supper, and going to bed, it would expel all Gravel and Stone without the least inconvenience or disturbance. It was claimed to be good for strengthening of the stomach, dissolving all thick and bilious humours, all bruises on the hands and feet, all kinds of fever, indisposition of the stomach, liver, loins or lungs, cure asthma, shortness of breath, cough, inward or outward sores and hysterical pains. It would advance the menses and facilitate the excretion of urine and stool and in doing so would restore the face to a fresh and wholesome color. It would cure the Feary, The French disease and kill the worms.

All of the above distempers could be cured by taking fifteen drops of the remedy every second day. Children could be administered as many drops as they had years.

In addition to its numerous other virtues the Remedy would cure palpitations of the heart, all anxieties, Megrims, Giddiness and headaches by smelling it or putting little balls of cotton soaked in the medicamentum in the ears of the sick person.

If the patient would dip the tip of his finger in the Remedy and apply it to the corners of his eyes twice or three times daily and do this for a fortnight or a month, it would make him so strong-eyed that he would surely not need spectacles until the age of seventy or eighty.

As mentioned before, a popular advertisement for remedies would feature patient testimonials of its good effects. For example, one man claimed that his ulcers of twenty or thirty years given up on by his physician were miraculously cured by virtue of this Remedy. The greatest pain of colic that could be would immediately cease after thirty drops of the Remedy. It was also heralded to be a good mitigator of the inward pains of newborn children, giving them one or two drops of the Remedy in breast milk.

The accepted treatment to draw fever from the head of a sick child was to tie vinegar-soaked, pepper-sprinkled herring to his feet. They were put on at night and by morning were dried out that the bones of the herring were very uncomfortable on the child's feet. It was thought by the oldtimers that in the drying out process, the fish would draw the fever from the ill child. Why the application was made on the feet instead of the head is just another one of those old mysteries.

There were many fantastic remedies for curing colds such as cutting out brown paper in the form of a heart, dipping it in goosegrease and applying it to the chest. If this did not work the good old-fashioned mustard plaster would be tried.

In mild cases of sore throat or arm paraffin oil was rubbed in at night but it was considered an even better cure if a wool stocking taken from the foot of the invalid was wrapped about the throat. When tonsils became badly swollen or inflamed a small funnel was fashioned of brown paper and sulphur was blown down the the throat onto the tonsils.

To cure an earache a small curl from the head of a Negro was placed in the ear. During the winter months a sure way to ward off disease was to tie a small bag containing camphor or asafetida about the neck. Camphor was not a bad smell but the odor of asafetida would not by any means increase the popularity

of the wearer.

To relieve rheumatism a small potato or nutmeg was carried in the pocket while for a sprained or broken wrist, an eel or snakeskin was wrapped tightly about the injured member. Insomnia could supposedly be cured by placing poppy seeds gathered from the flower garden under the pillow.

When we compare the original prescriptions of old time New Brunswick with our modern methods of treating sickness we can realize the tremendous strides made in the past hundred years by science and medicine and certainly we can look with confidence to a bright future of continued scientific development.



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Very interesting

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