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A HISTORY AND COLLECTION OF
OLD HOME REMEDIES AND BELIEFS
~~ABOUT~~
ABOUT DISEASE

Respectfully Submitted to:

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By:

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Disease is the arch enemy of mankind. It has interfered with his every activity all along the path of progress from a primitive cave dweller to an occupant of a modern high-rise apartment. Man has always lived in awe of disease. At one time he considered it divine punishment, at another time a visit from the devil, and more sensibly, a naturally occurring thing that would happen on life's unstopping journey from childhood to the grave. However, he has learned that to survive he must beat down this ever-watching enemy, disease, and today with every scientific tool available, he wages an endless warfare against disease.

To a modern civilization, inwhich a seemingly endless myriad of pharmaceuticals are compounded and dispensed under antiseptic conditions, the "medicine man", "witch doctor", or herbalist as a dispenser of "Indian remedies" or "bush medicines" may be outdated. Yet faith in home remedies remains a necessity for people isolated from midern medical care; a matter of choice to others.

A Brief History of Drugs Through the Ages

From the beginning, mankind has adopted a fateful attitude towards disease and, in attempting to combat desease with drugs, men have interpreted the mysterious power of medicines either in material or magical terms, depending on the particular stage of human evolution.

The animism of esrlier times sustained belief in a kind of spiritual matter penetrating the universe. This substance was said to be presented in differint concentrations in inanimate objects and in living things. When this spiritual matter threatened to evaporate from a sick person, it was thought that it could be replaced by a drug, in which it occurred in concentrated form. Often the remedy did not even have to be taken; a cure could be effected simply by bringing the material into close contact sith the patient's body.

Animism was gradually ousted by 'demonism', which supposed that illness was caused by an evil spirit taking posession of the sick. This gave rise to the notion that the healing and toxic effects of a drug are also due to a demon

residing in it. If this demon was powerful enough, it could be used to exorcize the spirit of the disease and, if it were worn- or kept in the house, the remedy would actually prevent the spirit of the disease from entering. These notions are still a conscious or unconscious part of folk medicine. Seventeenth-century witchcraft was based on similar ideas, and so was alchemy; the experts of the day believing that demonic spirits caused chemical reactions.

By trial and error, primitive man must have acquired biological knowledge that was useful in determining which plants and animals possessed food value and which were to be avoided because they were unpalatable, poisonous, or dangerous. His observations were handed down from one generation to another and were added to by his progeny. The healing powers of certain herbs, roots, juices, and animal parts were undoubtedly discovered by accident; but once these attributes were learned, they were too important to be forgotten.

In the ancient oriental, Egyptian and early Hellenistic civilizations, medicine was the secret science of the priests, who attributed the disease and cure to a specific deity. Healing was effected by sleeping in a temple and by other magic rituals, some of which included rational medicinal measures.

The medicaments of ancient times like those mentioned in the writings of Dioscorides (1st century a.d.) came principally from the Mediterranean region, but in the Middle Ages when Arabic culture reached its peak, the range of available medicines was extended by drugs from India, Indonesia and South East Africa. Explorers and missionaries of the modern era have brought countless new and effective drugs from the New World, Africa, and the Far East.

Chemical preparations also found increasing medical application, although they didn't really revolutionize the range of therapeutic agents in common use. Most early physicians were convinced of the infallibility of authority and, until far into the eighteenth century, Official pharmacopoeias were loath to monograph new drugs. They merely reiterated

the formulae of antiquated remedies and absurd indications.

This conservatism prevailed until the Age of Enlightenment. A Swiss scholar Haller insisted that traditional remedies be thoroughly tested on healthy and sick people and only included in the pharmacopoeia if their action does actually agree with the old indications.

The sciences of botany and chemistry developed rapidly. A golden age of pharmaceutical history followed in which pharmacists emerged as the founders of modern chemistry. However, even now there still remains some people with a firm belief in their own home-made remedies.

Traditional Sources Attributed to Disease

From reading material for this paper I have concluded there were three main traditional sources people attributed to death-and disease. Some early home cures were developed as remedies for these ailments.

1) The anger of an offended external spirit- Nothing can be more easily aroused than the anger of a spirit. The aborigines of Australia ascribe smallpox to a spirit who delights in mischief! in Cambodia all disease is attributed to an evil spirit who torments the side man. The Assyrians and Babylonians believed that the world was swarming with noxious spirits, who, in food or drink, might be swallowed, and so cause disease. Exorcisms were employed to expel the spirits, apparently in all cases:- for no mention has been found of medicine. It is more natural to regard the spirits as each appointed to a special charge, as do the Mintira of the Malay peninsula, than causing all diseases impartially because they simply/happened to be diseases. Some tribes of Indians have tried to appease the anger of offended water-spirits by offerings of such things as they themselves most prized. Paralysis was explained in Shetland, in former days, by saying that an evil spirit had touched the limb, or that the sound limb has been separated and an insensible mass substituted. It was a well-known fact that the Gods of one nation become the devils of their conquerors or successors.

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2) The supernatural powers of a human enemy- This was next in importance to the theory of the origin of disease. Even in this century newspaper readers must be aware that wise women whose curses are feared, and whose advice is craved, are not uncommon in England. A priest should be able to watch over these enemies. If he cannot or does not see fit to trace the disease to a direct imposition on the part: of an external spirit, should be able to point out a person who has occasioned the mischief. The office of magician is even in some places hereditary; the son succeeds the father, if the father has managed to save himself. Foreigners were regarded as suspicious, likely to bring with them visible or invisible means of bringing harm on the shores on which they land.

"It is curious that to present day, natives still regard strangers with aversion on account of a malady in St.Kilda, a species of influenza, locally known as "strangers* cold", which almost invariably follows the arrival of a vessel from the outer Hebrides. The disorder has been known to break out when the visitors were entirely free from it; the simple contact of civilised men in some mysterious way being sufficient to create it."

3) The displeasure of the dead-That disease should be caused by the dead is not a conception which can belong to the earlier ages of culture. It was believed death could be caused by a species of warfare between the dead and the living. Not improbably the dread of the spirits of the dead in general arose from dread of the spirits of the magicians in particular. In Madagascar, when a death occurs in one of their villages, the settlement is broken up, and the tribe remove their homes some distance from their former abode, believing that the spirits of the dead will haunt the spot, and do harm to those who remain in the place where it had dwelt. It is a Devonshire belief that you can give a neighbour fever and chills by burying a dead man's hair under his threshold. In New Jersey, walking over a hidden grave was said to cause incurable cramps in the foot. Among miscellaneous theories to account

for diseases or illnesses; in Ulster the brown foam from the seashore is said to cause warts to grow.

Domestic ffolk Medicine-Old Customs and Beliefs

The earliest attempts at remedying diseased conditions were by means of herbe. Primitive man undoubtedly recognised the advantages of life in the open, with a well-ventilated habitation, if he had any at all, and free access to pure water. The Indian knew the importance of keeping the skin, bowels, and kidneys open, and the geyser, the warm spring, and the sweat-oven were his matural substitutes for a Turkish bath, Washing, followed by a vapor bath and a cold plunge, was the North American Indian's successful sheme in the case of intermittent and remittent fevers, a vapor bath and dose of willow-bark decoction were hisiminstays against rheumatism. Like the ancient Babylonians, ne nad his fixed periods for cleansing. Massage was long known and practised by the Indians, Japanese, Malays, and last Indians, hypnotism by the Hindus, innoeulation against small-pox by the Hindus, Persians, and Chinese.

The custom of the "couvade", where Husband at childbirth undergoes medical treatment, is perpetuated in Ireland. Historically the custom is traced to the time when succession through the father instead of the mother, as originally, was adopted. The father then became the important relation, In course of the progress of civilization, however, the father became weary of the senseless confinement and limited regimen which his position as father of the child was supposed to entail. Most people have forgotten the practice which marked the great social and legal change. But in Ireland a tradition remains. The husband doesn't pretend to suffer the pains of labour, but the murses boast that they possess the power of transferring the sufferings to him or to any other person they please. In earlier times when the nurse announced to the husband that he was about to be a father she brought the pretended pains, and this was a declaration that his confinement and restricted living must

commence. Now the nurse threatens a real transfer, and, not understanding why the husband should be the only sufferer, she boasts of being able to give the mother's pain to any man, particularly to old bachelors.

In Scotland the newly-born child in the Highlands was given ash-sap at once, because it is a powerful astringent and also a guard against witches? and in the lowlands bathed in salted water, made to taste it three times, because the water wan strengthening and also abnoxious to a person with the evil eye. It is said in Ulster that it makes a "crowe" of a child, ie., dwarfs it, if a man puts his leg over the child's head. As an antidote to sickness the Chinese stain the forehead of their children on the fifth day of the fifth month, and a medicated cake prepared at noon of the day is in high repute for the cure of diseases.

A Durham precaution against whooping-cough was followed by fatal results in 1879. In order to secure her newly-born child against whooping couigll, the mother's "friends" compelled her on the day after birth to sit up in bed with the child in her arms while they combed her hair, so as to fall over the infant. The woman died.

An Irish remedy for sore throat is to apply salt herring to the feet. Many people carry brimstone about their person as a remedy for cramp. To carry a raw potato or a loadstone in the pocket is a general charm against rheumatism. The Saxons said a remedy for nose-bleeding was to slip a key down between the clothes and the skin. It has been said to be a relic of a symbolic act of the Norse, and connected with the Thor, but whether assisted by faith or not, the application of the cold metal generally was successful, as it causes a stoppage of the bleeding by acting in a reflex manner on the nerves, and producing contraction of vessels distributed in the neighbourhood of these nerves. To cure warts a common remedy is to tie as many knots on a hair as there are warts and throw the hair away. Witches sought in Scotland to compass evil by tying knots. Winches, it was thought, could supply themselves with the milk of any neighbour's

cows if they had a small quantity of hair from each of the animals and to tied knots in it. In Sussex, it is said that to prevent toothaches, be careful always to put on the right stocking before the left, and to put the right leg into the trousers before the left. In another area, exactly is followed. In the early part of the centruy the Mexicans took medicine with the right hand if they were to benefit the liver, and with the left hand if for the kidneys. To cure a burnt finger, Worcestershire people say to keep it a secret, spit on the finger, and press it behind the left ear.

Most of these remedies are superstitious beliefs passed down from generation to generation without any questions asked. Now with new research and modern medicine most of these old beliefs have been discarded*¹ However, a few old families probably still hold some faith in these old-fashioned remedies and it is fascinating to read about them and how some of them originated.

Plants as Remedies

The majority of urbanites think of the use of plants for self-medication as a quaint custom of the past left behind in the forward march of the 20th century, or perhaps currently practesed only in deep jungles of far-away places. The truth is that in many parts of the world, near and far, even in the centers of bustling cities, folk medicine is a living art and a mormal way of life for millions of people. "Too, the current wave of interest in nature and propaganda against refined foods, additives, and synthetic drugs have turned many sophisticated Americans into abnormal devotees of health foods and "herb" teas of tisanes* with little realisation that many of the latter are not derived from "herbs" at all, but from roots, barks, berries, and leaves of wild trees and shrubs that were formerly commonly utilized in crude form by rural dwellers, also in prescriptions formulated by old-time apothecaries. Many of them are still official botanical drugs in South America, Europe, and elsewhere".

Today we seem reluctant to admit that the active ingredient in many medicines may come from a plant, be it an anti-

biotic isolated and purified from a culture of fungi, or a complex chemical discovered first in a leafy plant and later synthesized for convenience in laboratory glassware from a variety of simpler chemicals. The green-plant has not only fed and clothed man, but has offered a source of relief from pains and ailments afflicting the human body. Perhaps "cures" were discovered by trial and error, and perhaps not all of the mixtures prescribed were important or effective; nevertheless, a cure of relief was obtained. The knowledge of such useful plants was, and often remains a carefully guarded secret of the practitioner, to be shared only with a trusted apprentice or successor, or passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next. A visitor to any rural market still find dried plant materials displayed for sale. Frequently the botanical identification of these may be extremely difficult or even impossible, as one learns when examining finely crushed leaves or even whole roots.

Cultivated medicinal plants have been propagated in China, India, and many other lands for centuries. Plant cultivation was not unknown to the people of ancient civilizations. An Irish cure for sore throat is to tie cabbage leaves round the throat, and the juice of cabbages with honey was said in England to cure hoarseness or loss of voice. A certain cure for deafness was said to be ants' eggs mixed with the juice of onions dropped into the ear. This was a Scotch recipe. Persons in Sweden who are afflicted with the falling sickness carry with them a knife, haring a handle of oak mistletoe, to ward off attacks. To give a child sap was one of the first cares of a Scotch nurse, and sometimes weakly children were washed in dew from the leaves of the sacred tree. Silver weed if steeped in butter-milk is said to remove freckles and brownness. Cork is thought to have the power of keeping off damp if placed between the bed and mattress, or between the sheets. To bite the first seen fern that appears in spring off by the ground is said, in Cornwall and elsewhere to cure toothache, and to prevent its return during the remainder of the year.

Animal Cures

The consideration of what appears at first to be simply animal cures is rendered somewhat difficult by the fact that those animal cures do not in most cases depend simply upon the animal association. There are other associations not easy to distinguish or to trace. beliefs and superstitions regarding the curative powers or properties of animals which have come to us, often altered and distorted.

The dog does not enter so largely in folk-medicine as might have been expected. In Scotland, a dog lancing a wound or a running sore was thought to effect a cure. For a fever the right foot of a dead black dog hung on the arm is said to be a good remedy. The tongues of dogs were said in France and Scotland to cure ulcers. To remove warts, rubbing the* wrist in the taxi of a tortoiseshell tom-cat in May has been recommended. This may be connected with the inexplicable tradition that tri-coloured cats protect against fire. A New England recommendation to rheumatic patients is to take a cat to bed with them- possibly with some thought that they will be so much occupied in thinking about the cat that they will have no time to think about their pains. Generally over England and Scotland it is believed that any directions given by a man riding a piebald horse as to the treatment of whooping cough will give satisfactory results. The hare, which shares with the cat the reputation of being the familiar of witches, has naturally some virtues attributed to it. The right forefoot worn in the pocket will infallibly ward off rheumatism. This is a common belief in England; the ankle bone has been said to be good against cramp.

As the snake twined around the staff of Hygieia is the symbol of health, its part in folk medicine is not unimportant. In China the skin of the white spotted snake is used in Idiopathy, rheumatism, and palsy, and the native doctors are said to make free use of the flesh of other serpents in their medicines. In New England in the present day keeping a pet snake, or weaning a snake-skin around the neck, is believed

to prevent rheumatism; and rattlesnake oil is prescribed by the Indians for the same discomfort, and for lameness of all sorts. Serpent's skin steeped in vinegar used to be applied to painful teeth. For the cure of a swollen neck in Sussex, a snake is drawn nine times across the front of the neck of the person affected, the reptile being allowed to crawl about for a short time after every third application. When the operation is finished, the snake is killed, the skin sewn in a piece of silk and worn round the patient's neck. The swelling by degrees will gradually disappear as probably it would at any rate.

A tooth from a living fox was thought? to be an excellent cure for inflammation of the leg; if the tooth was wrapped up in a fawn's skin and carried as an amulet. An Irish superstition is that a. fox's tongue applied to an obstinate thorn will cause its immediate withdrawal from a suffering foot. That a child who has ridden upon a bear will never have whooping cough is a common English belief, and much of the profits of the bear-keepers of old is said to have been made from the fees of parents whose children had been permitted to have a ride. Anything that a western Indian dreams of at his first fasting may be his medicine for life.

"When the Queen of Charles 11 was ill, and Pepys had come to St. James to inquire on October 19, 1663, he was told that she had slept five hours pretty well, and that she waked and gargled her mouth, and to sleep again. Her pulse, however, beat faster, beating twenty to the King or my lady Suffolk's eleven. She had been so ill, he adds, as to be shaved, and to have pigeons put to her feet and extreme unction administered." This application of pigeons to the feir seems to have been a last resource.

Old Drugs Still Being Used Today

Even in this age of man-made miracle drugs, medicine is still using effective drugs derived from ancient herbs. Some of these drugs once had sinister reputations. The Roman Emperor Claudius was poisoned with belladonns. Hamlet's

father with henbane and aconite*. But mild doses of belladonna and henbane are now valued for their muscle-relaxing effects, while aconite has been used as an ointment to relieve acute pain of ailments like rheuralgia and rheumatism.

Another ancient poison was meadow saffron, known to the Homans as "Calchicum autermnale" (autumn crocus). From its comes dklchicine, useful in treating gout and arthritis.

In medieval times, physicians knew that squill, an onion-like plant found near the Mediterranean seashore, was a good heart tonic. They didn't know they had an even better heart stimulant, digitalis, employed chiefly as an external remedy for skin conditions until the 18th century, when it was first used to treat heart disease.

One of the best old drugs is cinchona which, like ipicae, was introduced into Europe from South America in the 17th century. The powdered bark of the Peruvian tree, cinchona was exported on large quantities once colonists realized its remarkable ability to halt the recurrent high fevers of malaria. Not until the 19th century did scientists isolate from cinchona one of its active ingredients, quinine, prescribed for malaria today..

Conclusion

Such remedies as have been described in this paper seem a little incredible to an age in which emphasis has been placed upon care, accuracy, and extensive research in the area of pharmaceutical preparations. It seems obvious that these "home-remedy" people" could not provide all the answers to their medical needs. However the expert of this modern age can't even do that. It is possible to gain from these people's experience, although perhaps not pharmaceutically. The important thing is that they were innovated to recognize and answer their own needs, and they were able to survive. I only hope that there will never be a cure for the will to live.

¹¹ Where the wound is
the plaster must be...

Music helps not the toothache

Nor love they life nor hater but what thou livest
Live well: how long or short, permit to heaven

The grand secret seems to be, to contrive that the
exercise of the body and that of the mind may serve
as relaxations to each other

Those who are candidates for health, must be as
circumspect in the task they set their mind as in the
exercise they give to their body

The patient can oftener do without the doctor than the
doctor without the patient

What we have been longest used to is most likely to
agree with us best

Who steals an old man's supper does him no wrong "

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