

HISTORY OF MEDICINE

Tickle with a feather

A light-hearted look at medicine 120 years ago

J. S. Warner

Support the hanging body and cut through the rope gently. Until the arrival of a medical man apply leeches to the temple and take blood with cupping glasses.

These were the serious instructions given to the reader in 1870 by the well-known publisher Samuel Beeton (husband of Mrs Beeton of cookery fame) and may be found in his book of 365 pages, *All About Everything*, sold in those days for 2/- (two shillings), or 2/6d with cloth gilt. In our age of antibiotics you will find its advice on medicines, health and general topics curious, but some may still be successful . . .

Do you suffer from ague? Well, here's the cure — it's a favourite and considered most efficacious, and I bet granddad enjoyed it: beat up a new-laid egg in a glass of brandy and take on going to bed. Equally popular was 3 grams of snake root, 40 grams of wormwood, and 1/2 oz of best powdered Jesuit bark — taken in a half pint of port wine.

Parents with young daughters will be grateful for the following advice on the treatment of hysterics, occurring mainly in young nervous unmarried women, we are told, and not to be confused with apoplexy, which attacks those over 30 years of age. Loosen the patient's stays immediately (don't rush) and on partial recovery give 20 drops of sal volatile in a little water. If the patient is strong, let her live on a plain diet and take plenty of exercise with occasional doses of castor oil; the latter was a popular cure-all in those days.

Cures for baldness

Advice for men is not forgotten. How sorry I am not to have read these infallible cures for baldness many years ago, at an age when it might still have mattered. Here is one of the pomades you can make: Macerate a drachm of powdered catharides in an ounce of spirits of wine. Shake well for a fortnight, filter and mix with lard, using tincture of bergamot for scent. Apply, stand back and watch the hair grow. But I prefer the following: take 4 oz of honey, add 7 1/2 oz of clean white sand (well washed) which has been perfectly dried and distil in a retort. This much-esteemed mixture was called 'honey water for the hair'.

Maybe you fancy this one, recommended by the celebrated Dr Douvergne: using 1 part tar, 10 parts lard with plenty of fragrant substances, you will have one of the best remedies for baldness. The success rate is not recorded.

Mr Beeton assures us that most writers recommend the following treatment for dog bites: the wound should be kept open for as long as possible, which would be assisted by the insertion of beans in the wound, followed by the application of a large linseed poultice.

Stopping a badly bleeding nose has always been a problem, so it is rewarding to learn the correct procedure at last. Dip a handful of fresh stinging nettle leaves in water, pound in a mortar, squeeze in a wringing cloth, and squirt the liquid up the nostril with a small syringe.

Does a member of your family suffer from knock-knees? Well, Mr Beeton has a recorded testimony from a satisfied correspondent who was once badly knock-kneed and it ends, 'Now I am as straight as anyone'. Place a small book between the knees and tie a handkerchief round the ankles, two or three times a day, gradually using a thicker book.

And here is the considered treatment for cases of drowning: the person must never be hung up by the heels to drain the lungs — a treatment which is quite useless and said to be as bad as hanging the victim up by the neck. Your first instruction was to wipe dry and wrap in blankets, but (this is the part I like) if these are unobtainable, clothes of bystanders *must* be used. One obviously refused to accept any objections from bystanders to hand over their clothes. After ten minutes in a warm bath and a sound rubbing, mustard poultices should be applied to the feet, inner surfaces of thighs, legs and palms of hands with warm bricks under the armpits. Then the nose should be tickled with a feather and smelling salts applied. If the lucky person recovers but shows peculiar head symptoms, he should be bled. Attempts at resuscitation may be continued up to ten hours, and can include using bellows up one nostril, closing the other and the mouth. If you do not have a bellows, use a piece of strong paper or card rolled to form a tube.

Those parents today who do not give their children castor oil may have second thoughts on having this assurance: 'It is an excellent and safe medicine'. For children over 10 years, one tablespoon may be administered safely.

To deviate from medical matters for a moment, I must enlighten you on the easiest method of sweeping your chimney, especially now winter is upon us. Take protection against falling soot and fire a double-barrelled shot-gun up the chimney.

Reluctant leeches

Let us return to medical matters, and surely Mr Beeton's comments about leeches reluctant to do their job are among the most interesting. Sometimes difficulties arise in making them bite, as they have a great dislike of certain people, while others they take to immediately. Washing the place where they will be applied is suggested, using warm water and wiping dry, or smearing the place with a little blood. Failing which, leeches may be steeped in weak white wine or pressed with a cloth steeped in wine. Either method should encourage them to perform, we are assured.

Beauty aids are not forgotten, and here is one for ladies wishing to make their own rouge — as made by Turkish beauties, we are told. You will require the following ingredients, and here again we have strange names: gum benzoin (an aromatic juice from a Javanese tree), powdered

red sanders (another difficulty, being an Asiatic tree with dark red heart-wood), dragon's blood (a red resinous exudation from another tree . . . sorry I can't give you the name). All must be mixed in spirits of wine, left to stand for 14 days, strained and kept well corked. An unrivalled schoolgirl (or harem) complexion is guaranteed.

If you experience difficulty in getting to sleep your troubles are over, for the remedies are all fairly simple. Here is the first: put 1 lb or 1½ lbs of fresh hops into a pillowcase, and you will find that the delightful fragrance released by the warmth will induce a refreshing sleep. But if you are a devil for punishment try using a flat brush (it excites circulation) or a rough towel for some time, or resolve to keep your eyes open in the darkness. Or, as a last resort, try to remember a succession of dates, such as the reigns of the kings of England. A bit tricky perhaps, but one could substitute the dates when our Prime Ministers achieved office — if that's any easier.

Watch that wet nurse!

We must now turn to a serious matter and discuss some of the problems which may arise with the employment of a wet nurse. Her correct eating habits are essential if the baby is not to suffer. Many wet nurses have no conscience and feed greedily on fries, cabbages, cucumbers, pickles and other dangerous condiments. When the baby is wracked with pain, she hotly denies having eaten incorrectly, while the babe is dosed for some days after with medicines. In her ignorance she disbelieves the cause of the baby's discomfort and when no one is looking will once again indulge herself. If she was caught out the punishment was the administering to her of a good sound dose of medicine for misconduct.

The mother was advised to watch the nurse carefully at all times to see that hidden bottles of the latter's deadly syrups were not given to the unfortunate babe. These medicines often included castor oil, regarded by these formidable women as having excellent healing properties. The mother was also warned that the wet nurse might give the infant narcotics to assure her own sound sleep, and that she should always be on her guard against advice given by an unprincipled nurse.

Fishermen have not been forgotten, and if you are troubled by gnats, soak a piece of rag in spirits of salts and tie above your head or to your hat. If out shooting you may carry out the same procedure with equal success.

If you value your voice, remember that after illness the best remedy is one or two raw eggs taken daily. But we are assured that most professionals on the Continent use the following to improve their voice: melt copaiba balsam (from a South American tree) with wax in a new earthen pipkin, then stir in powder of liquorice root. Make pills and take two or three, four times a day.

Why not make your own tooth powder? Here is a recipe for the whole family, concocted by a Mr Grosvenor: mix 3 lbs each of calcined oyster shells and rose pink, ½ lb of Florentine orris root in powder and 25 drops of oil of rhodium, which as you no doubt know is obtained from the scented wood of a Canary Island convolvulus. After pulverising it very finely pass it through a sieve and pack in bottles.

In the cold weather you will no doubt grumble about your lumbago. Don't despair — Dr Day speaks most enthusiastically of the success of his new treatment. The idea is to produce counter-irritation. Gently heat a flat, iron button in a spirit lamp and then draw the button lightly over the affected part. Dr Corrigan, however, prefers a hotter button and touches the skin at ½-inch intervals, lightly and as rapidly as possible. Both gentlemen claim their treatment to be most effective.

Not many of us are lucky enough to go through life without suffering occasional nervousness, so it is comforting to have the following medicine handy, which you should have no difficulty in mixing: one drachm extract of bark, 6 oz camphor julep, 3 drachms volatile tincture of valerium and ½ oz tincture of columbo. Take two or three tablespoonsful three times a day and the world will smile with you.

And finally we have one of the cheapest hints in the book. For those who have a stammering affliction Dr Warren of the Boston Society of Natural History suggested this easy one: on pronunciation of every syllable the afflicted person should tap with one finger. Once again we have the assurance that in no time at all the stutter will be overcome. Is it not worth a try?

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Dokter en digter

Koeplette

Fris geheup en diep gekeep
vroumens wat my hart rondsleep.

My liefste kleine vlakvarskog
met jou gaan ek nog baie spog.

Ons elkeen sien in ons verdriet
hoe iemand met sy smart ons skiet.

Verlate staan die graf en wag
op hom wat binne lekker lag.

Klink dit miskien vir jou na snert?
gewis, jy's op die regte perd.

Maar wag, voordat jy weg gaan jaag
beantwoord eers net hierdie vraag.

Wat het die lewe jou beloof?
as jy so aanhou hare kloof.

C. J. v. d. M. Pretorius