

Some Similarities Between Modern And Primitive Medicine

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IT is very strange, when one considers the views held by ancient and primitive peoples as to the cause of disease, that there is any similarity between their practices and those of modern medicine. They usually looked upon disease as due to magical influence or the presence of demons in the person affected; and naturally they treated the disease according to their views as to the cause. But although many, if not all, of their treatments were founded upon mysticism, there were many instances in which remedies were discovered which were later found to be of real value. Many are still in use.

Blood has always been looked upon as very essential to life, if not as life itself. It has been used for ages in religious ceremonies. This is probably due to the fact that everyone knew that the loss of blood caused death. Since early medicine and religion were so closely connected it was only natural that blood should be looked upon as a cure for many ills. Blood is red; a person with anaemia is pale, therefore, the treatment was to give them blood. Ants of various types were collected, macerated, and a tincture was made from the resulting material which was used as a love potion and diuretic. We now know the active ingredient to be Formic Acid which has been used as a diuretic, stimulant, and tonic particularly in neurasthenia. The treatment of rheumatic and debilitated persons by bee venom is based upon the observation that improvement was noted in those individuals who were accidentally stung by bees. The active principle here is Formic Acid.

The ox was a sacred animal in many countries in Northern Europe and in Egypt. Ox bile being the secretion of a sacred animal was therefore regarded as a cure for such ills as worms, indigestion, and diseases of the eye or liver. Today it is given as an aid to digestion in cases where normal bile secretion is deficient or absent. Milk was also the product of a sacred animal and therefore regarded as a cure, particularly for diseases of an inflammatory nature. It is a well known fact today that milk has the property of soothing such conditions as sunburn.

The value of Cod Liver Oil is known to practically everyone today and it is looked upon as a more or less modern remedy, but in reality it has been used by sea-faring people of Northern Europe for ages. In Germany the raw and offensive oil was used in the tanning of leather, and the sick people obtained it from the tanneries for use in the treatment of rheumatism. Ointments were a very favorite form of treatment by the ancients for external and sometimes internal conditions. The active, or supposedly active, ingredients have nearly all been found of little value and discarded.

The bases of these ointments, however, were, practically the same as those now used, such as lard, lanolin (sheep's wool fat), and beeswax.

Bathing and water cures have been used for a long time, mainly in association with religious ceremonies. Many native races,—the Moquis Indians of California, for example—used cold baths for pyrexia, but, owing to the fact that it was badly regulated, many fatalities resulted. This treatment of pyrexia is used in some instances by the modern medical practitioner.

The poppy or opium has been known since the time of the ancient Egyptians. Opium was first described in 40 A.D. by Scribonis Largus as the dried milky juice of the seed capsules. The sleep-giving properties were known long before this as is shown by references to this power in Greek mythology. Squill was a sacred flower in Egypt, being buried with the dead and hung in the houses of the living to keep evil spirits at a distance. It was used by Hyppocrates, Dioscorides, and later by Galen as a diuretic and an expectorant. Chaulmoogra Oil is obtained from the seeds of the Chaulmoogra tree which grows in the Malay Peninsula and in India. The natives of these places have long used it in the treatment of leprosy and other skin diseases. The method described by Theophrastus for extracting tar from pine is still in use today. He used the tar as a dressing for wounds, a treatment which is still used in wounds of animals. Turpentine, another product of the pine, was used by the ancients, just as it is today, for coughs and lung complaints. Ergot is a drug which has been and still is widely used for its action on the uterus. The drug is very old and its exact history is unknown, but it has been used by the Chinese as an abortifacient and in midwifery for an unknown period. Many modern drugs such as Belladonna, Hyoscyamus and Aconite, were known to the ancients but were not used on account of their deadly action. There is, however, evidence to show that Hyoscyamus was used as an anaesthetic in Caesarean section, and as a mouthwash for the cure of tooth-ache.

Obstetrics was the most advanced branch of medicine among the ancient peoples. The reason for this was that they applied to women the methods they used upon their domestic animals. If labor became very difficult many peoples massaged the abdomen and loins but others used more crude and even harmful methods, such as punching the abdomen with the fist. Malpositions of the foetus were often diagnosed and rectified by the acients and the uncivilized peoples of today. In Demaraland the native midwives are so skilled in diagnosing and rectifying foetal malpositions that they are employed by the European residents of that country. Version is practised by several savage races today—the Kalmuks, the natives of Massawa and Algiers, and the Unyoro of Central Africa. Forceps are considered a very modern obstetrical instrument but a similar device was found in the house of a midwife at Pompei in the Caucasus. The umbilical cord is variously handled by the different peoples. Ligaturing is not a very common practice, although it is done in Tahiti by the natives. Bleeding is stopped by cautery, hot ashes, or dust. Caesarean section is one of the oldest surgical operations. There are

several references to it in mythology, several heroes having been delivered this way. The ancient Hindus performed the operation on the dead mother if foetal movements were still perceptible. There is a case on record in which a native of Uganda performed the operation on his wife and closed the abdomen by means of pieces of wire pushed through the edges with strong thread wrapped around them. The ancients used posturing to promote drainage during the puerperium. This was practised by several of the North American Indian tribes when there had been some retention of the after-birth.

Surgery was not developed to a very high level among the ancients or primitive peoples. It is strange that in spite of the fact that man has been almost continually at war and receiving wounds, their treatment was characterized by neglect and carelessness. In a few cases bleeding was stopped by bandaging, cautery, or by a powder. The natives of Victoria, Australia, believe that bleeding cleanses the wound and they aid it. Then, when satisfied that the wound is clean enough, they dress it with a lump of resin. If they think the wound has closed prematurely they reopen it to promote drainage. Another instance of drainage of wounds is furnished by the Dakota Indians who inserted wicks of soft bark into wounds and irrigated them by means of a syringe made of a bladder and the quill of a feather. Suturing of wounds does not seem to have been a very general practice. There is the instance of the Caesarean section mentioned above. The North American Indians sewed up wounds with strips of bark or animal sinews. The most unique method of all was that employed by certain South American Indians who captured some workers of the leaf-cutter ants, which have very powerful jaws. They placed the edges of the wound together and allowed the ants to bite it, then cut the bodies away, leaving the jaws to act as clips. In the treatment of fractures the ancients were very well trained and obtained very good results. Splints and bandages have been found still in place on the fractured forearms of Egyptian mummies. Similar devices have been in use for centuries among the American Indians. Even the plaster cast has been used previous to modern times. In South Australia the natives encased the limb in clay which hardened and prevented displacement of the fracture, giving excellent results. Lithotomy was another operation practised by the folk-surgeons. Stone in the bladder is a well known condition and many peoples have for a long time had men whose profession was to cut for the stone. The operation was performed by placing the finger in the rectum, forcing the stone against the perineum, then cutting down upon it with a sharp instrument. The Indian operators removed the stone with a scoop.

This brief survey of the various branches of primitive medicine shows quite clearly that in spite of such handicaps as influence of magical beliefs and of religions, the ancients were very remarkable in the way they treated various ailments.

REFERENCE

MacKenzie: The Infancy of Medicine.