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Health History: Quirky treatments of the past



If you're wary about today's medical treatments, be happy you didn't live over one hundred years ago.

In 1899, asthma patients were recommended to try smoking to relieve their disorder.

In 650 BC, headaches, neck pain, intestinal ailments, and impotence were signs of omens. Remedies were created to identify

the demons responsible, and they were expelled with spells or incantations. Dog dung was used in many treatments to help drive off demons.

Throughout the 1800's and until the early 1900's, it was common practice to use laudanum (opium) to raise the spirits or relieve minor pain. *Dr. J. Collis Browne's Chlorodyne* was taken like morning tea, and Queen Victoria served her guests *Vin Mariani*, a popular solution of cocaine.

Until at least the 17th century, religion and magic were primary medical therapies. Bread baked on Good Friday would never go mouldy and would treat all types of diseases. Rings made from silver collected at the Eucharist would cure convulsions. The sacrament of confirmation would keep sickness away.

In the late 1800s, home remedies were available in stores, catalogues, and by direct mail from manufacturers. Each brand claimed to provide the vital key to health. Here are some examples:

Liquor was the main ingredient of most patent medicines. In addition to vegetable extracts and sugar, which gave each brand its own unique flavour and colour, remedies were also laced with cocaine, caffeine, opium, or morphine.

The Sears catalogue, for example, sold a morphine-laced mixture intended to be slipped into a *wayward* husband's coffee to keep him home nights. Unfortunately, it ended up being the bored homemakers and older people who imbibed in the concoction, developing an addiction.

The 1899 edition of the medical textbook the *Merck Manual*, was another source of treatment for several disorders. Uncontrollable sexual urges in a man were treated with a potent sedative heavily laced with alcohol. Females were given a different prescription: sulphuric acid, camphor, or tobacco. Typhoid fever was treated with morphine, opium, and cold baths. Puerperal fever, a strep infection that killed women after giving birth, was treated with bloodletting and chloroform. For meningitis, a brain infection still fatal today, the 1899 treatment was iodine and turpentine massaged into the skin. For baldness, a standard medical treatment was to apply ammonia to the bare skin or to take a "little" arsenic.

However, some individuals were years ahead of their time in their sensible approach to treating poor health. The eminent Canadian physician *William Osler* (1849-1919) advocated, "The physician treats the disease, but the great physician treats the patient." He also believed, "It is much more important to know what sort of patient has the disease, than to know what sort of disease the patient has."

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