

MEDICAL HISTORY: the cure was often worse than the disease

Are you wary about today's medical treatments? Be happy you didn't live over 100 years ago!

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

Throughout the 1800s and until the early 1900s, 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.

Heroin was synthesized in 1898 and was marketed for a short time as a safe and effective cough medicine.

The 1899 edition of the medical text 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 blood-letting and chloroform. For meningitis (a brain infection that's still fatal today) the 1899 treatment was iodine and turpentine massaged into the skin. And for baldness, a common medical

treatment was to apply ammonia to the bare skin or to take a "little" arsenic.

From 1780 to 1850, blood-letting was a common medical treatment. Patients usually lost a pint of blood at a time. Intestinal purging was another popular method practiced in this period. It was often induced by calomel, which is mercurous chloride, thus mercury poisoning was common. Sadly, more people perished than were saved by these medical treatments.

The cure for rabies, decreed by law in 18th century Ireland, was to smother the patient between two feather beds and then get a "sufficient number of the neighbours lying on it" until he was out of danger.

In the 1800s a popular Family Physician book gave the following advice for amputations: "Any man, unless he is an idiot or an absolute fool, can perform this operation."

In 1899 opium was prescribed to cure alcoholism. Another remedy to cure the craving for alcohol: suck an orange and drink a pint of hot water before meals.

A remedy for the common cold in the late 1800s was to inhale formaldehyde and call the doctor in the morning.

During the gold rush fever, our early settlers often suffered from scurvy (a vitamin C deficiency causing aching joints, fatigue, skin sores and swollen gums). Untreated, scurvy can cripple and even kill. In 1850 a common cure for scurvy was burying the patient in the ground with only the head protruding. In one tale, a traveler came upon an entire mining camp buried up to their necks, with only a few healthier miners standing guard against animal attacks.

In the late 1800s home remedies were available in stores and catalogues as well as by direct mail from manufacturers. Each brand claimed to provide the vital key to health. 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 "to be slipped into a wayward husband's coffee in order to keep him home nights." Unfortunately, bored housewives and the homebound elderly were susceptible to becoming addicts.

During the frontier days, potions or elixirs were sold by traveling "medicine men." Colder's Liquid Beef Tonic was sold as a cure for alcoholism, even though its contents were over 26 per cent alcohol. A best seller in the 19th century was Dr. Miles's Compound Extract of Tomato. It promised to reach a patient's "weak" spot. Today we know it as Ketchup.

Legislation eventually made it difficult for these pioneer pitchmen to sell their products. However, salesmen still found ways to reach their gullible audiences. Even today, if you're looking for a magic cure, you can always find one. ■

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Sources:

Old Merck Medical Manuals (sourced off the internet).

The Greatest Benefit To Mankind; A Medical History Of Humanity From Antiquity To The Present, Roy Porter.

Curious Facts, John May.

Frontier Fever, Elizabeth Van Steenwyk.



A cough suppressant Bayer had to cease production of in 1913, due to the growing number of heroin addicts (heroin is 4 times stronger than morphine).