



Medicine for Managers

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The Old Ones Are The Best

Christmas is a good time for reflection. How medicine has changed over the ages. The explosion of technology and tests, the huge panoply of drugs, and the development of specialities has revolutionised practice. It must have been so much easier in Victorian times. Medicine was a mixture of folklore and guesswork in the 1830s. Language was so important because communication was virtually all there was!

Average life expectancy was in the high 30s in the mid 1830s and actually fell as people moved to cities to find work.

The top ten causes of death around that time were:

1. Tuberculosis
2. Dysentery/diarrhoea
3. Cholera
4. Malaria
5. Typhoid Fever
6. Pneumonia
7. Diphtheria
8. Scarlet Fever
9. Meningitis
10. Whooping Cough

The cities were growing rapidly. Families were crowded together in filthy slums. The detritus and pollution resulted in rapid spread of disease by direct contact with skin and lung diseases and through the fleas and lice which proliferated. Disease affected everyone but children were decimated by the infectious diseases for which there was, of course, no treatment and which were promulgated by

terrible housing conditions, inadequate sewage, lack of clean water and abject poverty. There were some terrible cholera outbreaks in the 1830s and 1840s.

The more wealthy professionals and factory owners, living away from the city slums, in the verdant more rural areas with better housing were not subject to the same exposure to disease and so many more affluent Victorians had longer life expectancy.

There was little faith in the doctors in early Victorian times because they had very little in the way of effective treatments and those treatments had changed little since the middle ages. In general, diagnostic ability was poor and the treatments used were herbal remedies, purgatives and such things as cod liver oil.

The concoctions utilised were generally formulated as powders, pills and liquids of all kinds and colours and all were carefully labelled with their Latin names. The doctor or apothecary would have stores of herbs and plants and even some small animals which could be made up into medicine by the practitioner or his assistant. They would also have leeches to

reduce excess blood and allow the body to re-balance itself. Equipment in the surgery would include sets of scales, pill-rolling devices, pestle and mortar, measuring vase and, of course, a large book containing all the recipes.

A colleague with whom I trained in the early 70s had in his possession four large and magnificent glass flasks complete with taps which had stood on the sideboard in the surgery of his great-grandfather, who had practised medicine in the later Victorian period.

They were filled with coloured liquid when they were in his surgery; red, green, blue and yellow. When he saw a patient in need of treatment he would go to the flasks and fill a container with one of the coloured fluids, for which the patient would pay.

If the patient was no better in a week or two and returned to the doctor, he would fill another container with liquid of a different colour, similarly handed over and paid for. In fact the doctor apparently made the concoctions himself from a mixture of ingredients in a vat in the back of the building, dividing the mixture into four and adding a different colour to each. It seems that the placebo was born.

The average doctor in early Victorian times did have a wide array of 'agents' that were used to treat a variety of 'conditions'. Given the impurity of the treatments and the poor standard of diagnosis, there was no consistency or, indeed, logic to many treatments.

A variety of medicaments included treacle and vinegar (combined with laudenum to treat coughs), gum guaicum, obtained from a plant and used to stimulate menstruation and potassium permanganate, a purple-coloured

inorganic compound, were used for skin diseases. An extract of willow provided aspirin (salicylate) and was used in the management of pain. Digitalis, derived from the foxglove, and identified in the late eighteenth century, was being used for heart conditions including atrial fibrillation, though it probably killed more people than it cured in the first half of the nineteenth century.

During the Victoria time, patented formulated medicines appeared

- ***Culpepper's complete herbal*** included saffron, castor oil, nutmeg oil and other agents, taken to cleanse the body following alcohol poisoning
- ***Ayer's Cherry Pectoral***, used for colds and coughs, was actually a mixture of alcohol and opium. Formulated for children, it would be classed as a poison today.
- ***The Everlasting Pill*** was used in the treatment of unwanted humours and ills. It was in fact composed of antimony and was a popular remedy for cleansing the body by inducing severe vomiting and diarrhoea. A minute amount of the drug was effective. The drug was swallowed and passed through the gut producing its cathartic effect. When passed out it would be retrieved from the faeces and used again. Such a pill could serve all the members of the family and might even be passed down to the next generation.

A mainstay of treatment, however, was the use of narcotic drugs; opium, laudanum (a tincture made of opium) cannabis and cocaine treated a range of diseases.

The drugs relieved pain and induced sleep and were used to treat everything from colds to

heart diseases. In about 1848, Dr John Collis Browne introduced **Chlorodyne**, which was a mixture of alcohol, laudanum, cannabis and chloroform.

It was a huge hit, cheap and eased all manner of symptoms, inducing pain relief and sleep, and bringing with it a dependence problem.

Over the decades of the twentieth century the cannabis was phased out and the opiates progressively reduced. The name does still live on as "**Dr Collis Browne's Mixture**".

So, the treatment of illness, though rudimentary and imprecise, was developing in the Victorian era and many discoveries were made during that period. Certainly many diseases were recognised and the more skilled physicians were identifying them for what they were, though of course, for many doctors, diagnosis was based on fictional concepts and guesswork.

Many illnesses and diseases had colourful names which have faded into history. So let me leave you in 2019 with a short quiz.

How good are you at recognising today's illnesses from yesteryear's names?

Here is a list of twenty antiquated names, can you guess what the names were used to describe?

Some are easy to guess, some are based on symptoms, some are rather colourful, all are part of medicine's rich heritage.

Have a very happy Christmas and New Year.

Christmas Quiz 2019 – The Old Ones are the Best

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| Ablepsy |
| Ague |
| Camp Fever |
| Bad Blood The Great Pox Creeping Paralysis Generalised Paralysis of the Insane (GPI) Naples Disease Spanish Disease |
| Consumption |
| Strangury |
| Wool Sorter's Disease |
| Falling sickness |
| Livergrown |
| Chorea (St Vitis' Dance) |
| Softening of the Brain |
| Trench Fever |
| Dropsy |
| Apoplexy |
| Brain Fever |
| Bloody Flux |
| Mortification |
| Undulant Fever |
| Paristhmitis |
| Winter Fever |
| Canker |
| Child Bed Fever |
| Scrupox |
| Testicle dropsy |
| Putrid Fever |

The [answers are here](#) - no cheating!

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