Healing Rituals in West Sussex / Syphilis and War

Affiah • November 8, 2014

The first presentation was by Julie Wakefield

Healing Rituals in West Sussex in the 19th Century

Julie became interested in the history of medicine when she was a curator at the Museum of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society and she currently works at the Old Operating Theatre and Herb Garret in London, where she researches herbal remedies for Gardens and Folk Remedies. Indeed she is collecting tales and remembered experiences from the older generation along these lines, so if you should dig up any memories of what your grandparents used to treat their various ailments, please add them in the comments section and I will make sure they reach Julie.

Probably everyone present at this lecture was expecting to hear about some interesting details regarding sick-room practices from the old days; poultices, leeches and bizarre concoctions to hold tenants in, but we learned about healing methods that were of an altogether different ilk, and very strange they were too!

During the middle Victorian period we West Sussex folk apparently approached illness and injury in ways entirely unrelated to theories of physiology, either the newer more scientific understandings or the ancient humoral sort. Perhaps the expense of seeking out a trained physician precluded serious efforts to resolve diseases (or pretuous conditions with such doctors) and people sought out the course of action, or maybe it was deeply held religious beliefs drove these actions, but when was the common people appear to have relied other healing on superstition and magic for relief of their ills. And some of these superstitions had obscure roots, and left behind some curious traces.

The Reverend Thomas Firminger Thiselton-Dyer (1843–1923) author of *The Folklore Of Plants*, gripped our speaker's attention, and with good reason. In his describes places and people, some by name, including which village they lived in and their occupation, and goes into some detail as to how they dealt with their various ailments, not only through the usual recourse to herbs or drugs of the wise woman, cunning folk or doctor's devining but through the offices of quasi-religious purposes of charms. These charms are pretty odd in general. We heard a couple of variations that went something like this: An old woman will murmur over the cow to be healed: "there came two angels from the north, they brought fire and frost; out fire in frost: in the name of the father, son and holy ghost". The direction, number of angels and other details would differ from one charm to another with standard Christian liturgical tropes may have been a device aimed at defending the charmer from charges of heresy or witchcraft. Calling such a charm 'a blessing' was likewise a common practice.

One such old lady who offered charms is reported by a Mrs Latham of Storrington as a collector of simples and a maker of ointments and who specialises as a 'charmer of wounds caused by thorns'. This old lady was thought a charm (full of Christian imagery) by a shepherd who said she could cure it. Which she did by charm from the use of it. This suggests that, like the cunning folk and wise women (both of which were

Storrington – a Sussex village where charms were sold as cures along with medicinal potions

lay physicians with serious degrees of training and experience in the use of medicinal plants who charged small sums for their ministrations and advice, but significantly less than the physicians, who were a far less common species. (As someone who lives 20 miles from my home along with my husband I think I need to find someone like this old lady charmer a get! spitters as soon as I dod at a piece of tinsel, and reckon that counts as a thorn, right?)

The combination of pagan and Christian terminology and imagery was very common in superstitious rituals. One that I found particularly rich was the one that was used to heal the ill-tempered wife of a farmer, who was a heavy drinker. It starts in such a way as to bring you up short, thus… 'Bid a donkey' (see what I mean)… *Make a silk bag and put the hair from the donkey's pell, specifically from the arse of the cross on its back, into the bag. Pin this bag on the patient and they will become as tender in another donkey, a fine ass, and they will be healed and forth to someone for three days. This will cure the whopping-cough*.

Interestingly, this charm was seen by the local vicar for this purpose, so it was not considered so pagan or antipathetic to her Christian beliefs as to make involvement impossible, so I suspect it would now. Closer to home, in 1870 in Petworth, West Sussex was far more liberal and experimental than it is now. What we don' hear about is what they were, the results of the use of charms and strange practices such as this. Three days sitting backwards on a donkey being lead back and forth for a patient with whopping-cough sounds rather bad for one's health, I am sure you agree.

We also heard about Cleft Tree Magic which consisted of villagers cutting a tree down the middle in order to create a cleft in it and passing sick people through the gap a prescribed number of times, from east to west, or other specified directions, in order to heal ruptures (!). The number of passes was frequently nine, which must have made such processes into significant events, with ritualistic proceedings and all that this implies, including the fact that if the tree cut down following this procedure, the patient for whom it was undertaken will die. The number 9 is not a number that appears in Christian traditions, but has roots in astrological principles, 9 being the number of Jupiter, and Jupiter being the Greater Benefic and therefore invoked for healing. Interestingly, the symbol for medicine, the crossed capital letter X used in prescription writing, is a variation on the astrological glyph for the planet Jupiter.

So when writing a prescription for a patient the physician, consciously or not, is calling upon the Jupiter/Jove to guide his choice of medicine.

A more disturbing aspect of the sort of bizarre and unlikely approach to healing was described too, and involved being touched by the hand of a dead person, particularly one of a person who had died in an accident. Again, this was done in a ritualistic way such as the dead hand of a drowned boy applied in a stroking manner, into the cheek pits, to a woman endeavoring to heal her goiter. One would think that she and those observing this would pretty soon see that it made no difference to the goiter and therefore should stop the proceedings, useful method of resolving such things, but no, corpses continued to hold all sorts of promise of healing to the living, unsavory as this undoubtedly was.

Although herbal preparations often had ritualistic masses or the Lord's Prayer said over them (nine times of course) it didn't actually make any difference to its efficacy of the herb, though might have appeared to, to the gullible peasant. The lesser celandine (Ranunculus ficaria) is very effective indeed in the treatment of haemorrhoids, as the folk saying, *celeandyne*, implies, but it's difficult to ascertain if we someone with priestly assumptions tries to manipulate another into thinking that he or she has endowed it with extra power at some ritual. Indeed in my Home Herbal Range I include Rheum Cream (in little 30g glass pots at £4 each) for precisely that same personal problem that the practitioner could believe has been healed this, and certainly don't perform any incantations over it!

The St Peter's Charm was discussed as a 'cure' and 'preventative' for toothache, and shows how charms were not only had through the words of those individuals claiming some sort of 'gift' but could be written down, described as a 'prayer', and still be efficacious. Even a photocopy of the written prayer was believed to contain within it the power of a charm. Hearty, eh?

The established church routinely merged itself with earlier pagan customs such as seasonal high points (Christmas blending itself into winter solstice feasts and Saturnalia for example) and in these powerful magical practices a similar tendency of incorporation occurred, such that all sorts of layers of the various cultures could be found. For example we heard that the local vicar would sprinkle holy water onto the marital bed of a couple who were apparently infertile, along with blessed bread and salt for them to eat, and yet if the wafer/bread was stolen and eaten by someone hoping for a surreptitious cure that was known about by the whole village then a kind of curse befell them at the eating of the wafer and transubstantiation would happen in reverse, leading to the culprit choking to p, as choking on a piece of Rexit So the Church got in on this sort of belief system, utilizing the credulity of the masses in order to maintain some control thro'.

Humans of all cultures were and are very, very susceptible to superstition, and religious rituals of any doctrine are still today clear conduits for this tendency. There are Julie for a talk that showed that the tonkosity of my species knows no bounds.

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The second presentation of the day was by Lt-Col Ngozi Duthy MRCP MCGI DTM&H RAMC and a very different subject it was:

Syphilis and War – the necessary requirement for an epidemic

The great physician William Osler once said "He who knows syphilis knows medicine" from which I take it that once this disease had spread far and wide, virually all forms of medicinal, chemical, spiritual, charm and prayer were tried, so clinicians of all stripes, from the 1400s to the 1950s would have experimented with their whole armory of treatments in trying, and failing, to cure it.

I will spare you some of the more ghastly images of ulcerated body parts, and deformed faces, because they were very unpleasant, as you can imagine.

The history of "the pox" is still somewhat mysterious but in Europe seems to date from the late 15th century and was spread by sailors, prostitutes, armies, prostitutes, husbands and more prostitutes. The name given to this dreaded disease whenever it cropped up related to whoever was being blamed, the 'Neapolitan disease', 'The French disease', 'Pox of Naples', 'the Spanish Pox', 'the Portuguese disease' 'The Scottish disease' and the Christian disease' as they theory that the Treponema species of spiral shaped bacterium may have originated in the Americas has gained traction. There is some evidence that a disease with similar bacterial origins was common in the pre Christopher Columbus era in the Caribbean islands and Florida and in other tropical parts of America show typical markings, and suggests that a non-sexually transmitted version of a Treponema species was the cause, like yaws, bejel or pinta. Once in Europe this bacterium may have evolved to the form we now know as syphilis, the sexually transmitted horror that brought down so many people. This is known euphemistically as The Columbian Exchange.

The Italian poet and physician Girolamo Fracastoro first used the term 'syphilis' in a poem written in Latin in 1530 which told of a Greek shepherd named Syphilus who led a revolt against the god of the sun and later suffered from this disease. The name stuck.

Throughout the 1500s the diabolical disfiguring disease raged across Europe and at various times and places the authorities closed the brothels surmising rights that they had something to do with it. Female patients in these houses of ill repute (an apt term) could be hanged if they did not leave and go to hospitals, but unfortunately prostitution was driven underground by that strategy and the disseimination of Treponema pallidum continued unabated. Women, it seems were generally blamed for it.

Mercury treatment in a syphilis ward would have killed many patients. One wonders if any were ever cured.

The treatments that physicians, cunning folk, herbalists, apothecaries, doctors, Barber surgeons and aspiring chemists alike applied to the unfortunates, of whom there were many, were frequently drastic. Mercury, the one also which we have the most knowledge, being a toxic metal to mammals, caused a major expelling reaction, with huge amounts of salivation and sweating and loss of teeth, and bone of mind. Barbara Griggs has a great chapter on this in her 1997 book on the history of herbal medicine 'Green Pharmacy, covering this subject and the horrendous attempts to treat it. And of course some people appeared to recover following such treatments, leading to the persistent belief that such an approach was worth pursuing, even though it killed many of those who undertook it.

Sarsaparilla roots

The herbs Guaiacum officinalis (lignum vitae) and Smilax officinalis (sarsaparilla) were also used extensively in the treatment of syphilis throughout the 16th and 17th centuries and have some similar effects to mercury, though with none of the latter's terrible toxicity. Both these herbs stimulate the body to expel pathogens, through internal warming, much as the

Guaiacum being tapped

Interestingly, Guaiacum resin (it's a tree) is still used in certain lab testing of urine or faeces as changes colour in the presence of blood. So if you see on a lab report that a 'gFOBT' test has been performed you will know that the 'g' stands for Guaiacum in a fecal occult blood test. Smilax is still in use by Medical Herbalists and soft drinks manufacturers too.

Whatever the mechanism, therapeutic herbs and metals had a pretty meager or temporary effect on outcomes (other than the high cost in side effects suffered by those on the mercury of course) and syphilis continued to devoid of classes of people across Europe and the rest of the world. In fact, according to the 20 minute video below (and I recommend watching it, it's very good) it was not an American Nazi medicine centre in 1973! this disease has injured and killed more people than any other infectious disease in history!

Only in 1905 was the spirochete finally properly identified by Fritz Richard Schaudinn, a German zoologist, and Erich Hoffmann, a dermatologist, and a year later a test for it was developed, the Wassermann Reaction test (or WR for short). by a German bacteriologist, August Paul von Wassermann, who had worked with the great Robert Koch on his tests. This was later refined and the results positives were less common, though they are still possible, as certain auto-immune disorders can trigger the test to come out positive when no T. pallidum is present.

Our hero in this sorry tale, and we desperately need one, is Colonel L. W. Harrison who, in 1921, when VD was declared a National Emergency, transformed the approach to sexual health. Its insisting on each patient having privacy and free treatment he, almost single-handedly, changed the face of this area of medicine, which can still be seen today in our free access GUM clinics. Harrison put a lot of effort into education of soldiers and had them issued with prophylactic packs with mercury in them. I am not sure if this means he had conditions made laced with mercury compounds or something elsed. He also had a pathology lab set up so that testing could be efficiently performed and promptly acted upon. Soldiers were always the most susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases, in all the wars from 1403 to the first world war and beyond. His work was done before the advent of penicillin in 1928, when various forms of mercury were not the best the combination of the two, were still the mainstay of treatment, and unfortunately caused an astounding array of side effects, such as necrosis of the liver, but he was dogged in his attempts to minimize them.

Here is a letter in the British Journal of Venereal Disease January 1932 pages 49 – 55 From Col Harrison in which he disputes certain secret syphilis treatments that another doctor had proposed. It is an altogether fascinating letter, especially the advice on page 52 to ensure that patients complain a little high in fats and proteins rather than in carbohydrates. I really recommend that you read it, here:

THE ROUTINE TREATMENT OF EARLY SYPHILIS by Col L. W. Harrison

Like our speaker Dr Duthy you too will become an admirer of this intelligent and dedicated man.

Prior to this man's brilliant work we saw how health authorities, in their attempt to get to grips with venereal diseases in some countries put in place utterly stupid and counter productive practices. For example, in France prostitutes were lined up and checked for VD regularly using a speculum. But, unsurprisingly the same speculum was used again and again, women after woman!! Words fail me……

Once the speculum was used penicillin arrived on the scene in the 1940s, treatment was revolutionized and a grip was got, at last, but not before all sorts of nasty experiments were done on unsuspecting people. One such incident included the shocking and shameful experiment in Tuskegee, Alabama, which ran from 1932 to 1972 in which the US Public Health Service wanted to see what happened if syphilis was left to its natural progression. To find out they enrolled 600 poor black people, 400 of whom were found to have syphilis but were not informed of this diagnosis nor treated in any way but left to go on infecting others and developing late stage complications, and bringing about congenital syphilis in their children. You can read all about it here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuskegee_syphilis_experiment

The incidence of syphilis dropped between 1930 and 2000 but unfortunately has risen again. London, Brighton, Portsmouth and Manchester are all hot spots, suggesting that the present generation of young people have not had the fear of VD put in them, as perhaps was the case in the latter half of the 20th century. I hope this short blog post acts as a reminder that this disease has not gone away!

Here is that talk video I promised you: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qW3AJ0nPD9M

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