

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“The Tortured Past Of Medical Treatments”

Fortunately, we now depend on evidence-based medical studies (EBM) to justify medical care. It's described as “the conscientious, explicit, judicious and reasonable use of modern, best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients.” The EBM movement began in 1981, which allowed physicians to be able to apply their clinical experience to the latest and greatest medical research to diagnose health problems more quickly and accurately and prescribe the most appropriate treatments for the best outcomes. But, the past history of medicine has frequently led down misguided paths with errors and misconceptions. Bizarre treatments were all the rage but nowadays, they're hopefully practically nonexistent. Let's look at a few of these curious and strange practices. **Bloodletting.** Early surgeons in 13th century England took over the practice of bloodletting from medieval barbers. Blood was collected from gushing veins in basins, the volumes of which were weighed and measured. The surgeons would staunch the bleeding once they thought enough blood had been let. About 500 mL was taken on average or the volume equivalent of a modern-day transfusion! As late as the 19th century, patients continued to be bled twice a year at hospitals in England to maintain good health. After 4 bouts of bloodletting over 2 days for severe strep throat, George Washington died. His physician pointed to the removal of too much blood as a possible cause of death. **Insulin shock therapy.** Three revolutionary psychiatric treatments crept into existence in the 1930s: electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), leucotomy (i.e., lobotomy), and deep insulin coma therapy. Only ECT persists to this day. However, deep insulin coma therapy for schizophrenia treatment remained in practice until the 1950s. The practice was widely replaced in the 1960s with the use of neuroleptic drugs. **Tobacco smoke enemas.** Toward the end of the 18th century (now don't laugh) a Native American practice involving blowing smoke up a patient's rectum also became popular in England and the rest of Europe. Initially, tobacco smoke enemas were used to treat those who drowned, and tobacco smoke enemas were performed with little more than rubber tubing. The procedure became popular for a wide range of common illnesses—including headaches, hernia, abdominal cramps, and infections. By 1911, English scientist Ben Brodie discovered that nicotine was cardiotoxic; thus, tobacco smoke enemas soon became passé. **Pyrotherapy (fever).** Hippocrates noted that fever secondary to malaria could placate those with epilepsy. Like Hippocrates, Galen also noted the value of pyrotherapy, the practice of inducing fever for therapeutic purposes. It continued into the 1950s.

In the America that I love, many health myths have arisen. EBM optimizes clinical decision-making by integrating clinical experience and patient values with the best available evidence from well-designed and well-conducted research.

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