

Did Medieval Medicine Ever Work?

It all began as one of those Friday afternoon projects that medical researchers sometimes do to satisfy curiosity. No one expected it to work. The researchers were testing medieval medical remedies by replicating a 1000-year-old recipe for an eye salve. They were prepared to see it prove that medieval medicine was backward and even superstitious.

When the results came back, they were shocked to find that the recipe was incredibly effective in killing staph infections. Indeed, the medieval salve was actually a powerful antibiotic.

The finding threw everyone's medieval preconceptions upside down and led the researchers to conclude that medieval medicine was highly developed and followed a scientific methodology. They also believe that the rediscovery of medieval drugs can have implications for present-day drug discovery.

A New Medieval Perspective

At a lecture given at the Library of Congress on March 7, 2017, medievalist and biologist Erin Connelly told the story of the experiment with the 1000-year-old recipe known as Bald's Eyesalve. She is part of the interdisciplinary Ancientbiotics team which explores the relevance of medieval medicines for modern infections.

She claims that "Recent scholarship may show that there is more methodology to the medicines of medieval practitioners, and further inquiry may show that their medicines were more than just placebos or palliative aids but actual antibiotics being used long before the advent of modern infection control."

Bald's Eyesalve

The recipe that sparked the debate is found in a book held by The British Library. Titled *Bald's Leechbook*, the book has the ancient Anglo-Saxon recipe written in old English. The ingredients are organic materials accessible to everyone in the locality. It requires garlic and alliums, which could either be onions or leeks. These are mixed with wine and ox gall. The mixture is then put in a brass vessel and let stand for nine nights. After straining and clarifying, it is put in a horn and applied to the eye with a feather.

What seems like a haphazard collection of liquids and herbs was found to be much more. Researchers replicating the recipe found that any omission from the recipe dramatically diminished or eliminated its bactericidal qualities. Similarly, each ingredient on its own had no significant effect on the reduction in bacteria. They found that the nine-night incubation period served to make the mixture self-sterilizing and therefore effective. Likewise, omitting this period made the recipe ineffective.

The tests revealed a method of observation and experimentation that was anything but haphazard. Moreover, this was not a cure-all concoction. Dr. Connelly believes that it seems to have been specifically targeted for what it was made to treat.

A Wealth of Other Recipes

Bald's Salve is not the only recipe that shows promise. Dr. Connelly is working with others to find and test hundreds of others. Her research reveals ancient notes such as that found next to another salve that said: "Restored the child's eyes to perfect health and sight." Another mixture has a comment which in translation from Middle English says, "God has not given us a better recipe than this one. It makes even old men to read tiny letters without aid." There is hope that this might prove helpful for macular degeneration.

One particular book contains around 6000 references to specific ingredients, 360 very detailed recipes which address over 110 disease conditions. Tests of these recipes have only begun.

An Urgent Need for Medieval Solutions?

As microbes develop resistance to antibiotics, there is an urgent need to find new remedies quickly. It is estimated that around 700,000 people a year worldwide die of antimicrobial resistant infections. That number could reach ten million by 2050.

In response to the urgent need for novel routes to drug discovery, the Ancientbiotics team was formed in 2014 to look at medieval solutions. This interdisciplinary and international team believes that “the past could inform the future” in finding these routes.

Why Remedies Were Discontinued

It makes sense that the Church would be involved in healthcare. Her mission is the care of souls which often overlaps with the care of the body. By calling upon the faithful to exercise practical charity, the Church eventually organized history's first health network of systematic nursing

and hospitals. Many monasteries had a hospital for the poor annexed to them. Medieval universities also developed medical science to a significant degree. It should be no surprise that medieval antibiotics appeared.

Dr. Connelly only speculates why these promising medieval antibiotics fell into disuse. One plausible view was a great bias against the medieval period as a “dark age” that was very prevalent in Humanistic and Enlightenment times. Humanists and later Protestant scientists wrote off the Middle Ages as hopelessly backward.

In any case, the lost link with medieval medicine is being re-established by those like the Ancientbiotics team who are uncovering imaginative solutions from the past. Perhaps such studies might broaden into other fields, helping bring to light and build a deeper appreciation for the glories of Christian civilization that were suppressed.

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