

1800

Take Two Leeches & Call Me in the Morning

One morning, a young woman wakes up to the terror of a slight fever and a sore throat. She is afraid, because typhoid fever, influenza, smallpox and yellow fever all begin with symptoms like those. And there are no known cures for any of these diseases. An epidemic of yellow fever recently claimed more than 4,000 lives in Philadelphia alone.

Doctors have little know-how to cure even common illnesses. When the doctor arrives on horseback, he has no antibiotics or antiseptic to kill whatever germ troubles the young woman. No one knows yet that such things as germs cause disease. Instead, the doctor is certain that almost all illnesses come from "morbid spirits of the blood." His remedy: Remove the "bad blood."

The doctor takes a small, pointed knife from his instrument case. The young woman peers into the case and is relieved she doesn't have an infected wound in her arm or leg. Among the dozen tools are two saws for cutting off diseased limbs or those too badly broken to be set. Such operations are performed without anesthesia. The best the doctor can do is fill the patient with rum.

BLOODLETTING

The doctor wipes the knife on his coat sleeve and cuts into the young woman's foot, drawing off a pint or two of blood. "Bloodletting" is the most common remedy for nearly all ailments—although some say it kills more patients than it cures. It hurts, but it's better than the live leeches the doctor can also use to do the job.

The doctor is also the pharmacist.



Operations are often performed without anesthesia inside the patient's home.

His medicine case contains a variety of roots, herbs, barks and stimulants. For a fever and sore throat, he might select garlic, vinegar, tobacco or camphor.

If he thinks the illness is serious, he might also prescribe mud baths, vomiting—and more bloodletting.

Sometimes, the loss of blood weakens the patient so badly that recovery becomes impossible. (It is believed that bloodletting was a major cause of George Washington's death.) In this case, the woman is young and strong, and in a few days she is fully recovered. She congratulates herself on surviving not only the illness but the doctor's visit. As President Thomas Jefferson would put it in 1807, "The patient sometimes gets well in spite of the medicine." He wished doctors would stop their "experiments with a machine so complicated and unknown as the human body."

Even though the state of medical knowledge seems so primitive, the country is actually in the pioneering stage of modern medicine.

Doctors have found a way to inoculate people against smallpox. And they have been successful when they rely on, what Jefferson calls, "the healing powers in nature." They often prescribe nothing but rest, fresh air and a bland diet.

They have also achieved success using medicinal herbs, a practice learned from Indians. And they are slowly moving away from bizarre home remedies, like this one for severe fever: Pare the patient's nails into a linen bag. Tie it around the neck of an eel in a tub of water. The eel will die, but the fever will be broken.

—David C. King

Think About It: *Medicine has advanced a lot in the last 200 years. What do you think medicine will be like 200 years from now?*

1800

THE LAW

Crime & Punishment

Charles Dickinson stood before three boys accused of stealing a bearskin from his stable in New York City. He demanded a confession. Yes, they admitted, they had taken it. Dickinson gave the boys a good tongue-lashing and forced them to return his property.

Today, the story would probably have ended there. But this theft took place around 1800. And Dickinson insisted that the boys, who were all younger than 14, be brought to trial. One pleaded guilty. The other two were found guilty by a jury.

At that time, children over the age of seven were seen as adults in the eyes of the law. So the boys were sent off to do three years of hard labor in one of the crowded, early prisons. There, prisoners who broke the rules were subject to frequent—and legal—beatings by prison guards.

Sometimes juries took pity on young people and acquitted them or gave them light sentences. In other cases, children and teenagers were punished as adults, even sentenced to death.

In 1786, for example, a 12-year-old Connecticut girl named Hannah Ocuish beat up and killed a younger child. She was convicted of murder and hanged. In handing down the sentence, the judge told Hannah, "Sparing you on account of your age would be dangerous." He added that it might give the other children the idea they could commit such "atrocious acts" and go unpunished.

In the early 1800s, there was no such thing as a trained police force to enforce the law. County sheriffs

kept the peace and tracked down criminals in rural areas. Many cities hired night watchmen for 50 cents a shift to do the job.

In some areas, private citizens took the law into their own hands. A Virginia farmer named Charles Lynch led a band of men who tracked down, beat or killed people they considered outlaws. The word lynching—the murder of a suspected criminal by an angry mob—can be traced back to Lynch and his gang.

CRUEL JUSTICE

Justice was also harsh for those brought to trial. An early Connecticut law ordered death for any 16-year-old child who "shall curse or smite their natural mother or father."

People convicted of even minor offenses were often subjected to physical abuse that made 39 lashes with a whip seem tame in comparison. In Massachusetts, until 1805, a

counterfeiter was liable to have an ear cut off. In New Jersey, a colonial law ordered that a convicted burglar be "burnt in the hand with the letter I" for the first offense, "burnt on the forehead with the letter R" for the second offense, and "put to death as an incorrigible" for the third.

Executions were a popular form of entertainment well into the 19th century. Families gathered to watch hangings in 1800 the same way they go to outdoor concerts today. Authorities even erected gallows on hills so the spectators could get a better look.

As far as the audience was concerned, the worst thing that could happen was a pardon for the criminal. That often caused rioting by the disappointed crowds.

—Betsy Haggerty

Think About It: Why do you think people went to hangings? Would you go if you were invited?



A man in the stocks awaits a flogging.