

## **Medicine through the ages**

### **Family and Community care in Chinnor.**

Before the advent of orthodox medicine and the lack of local assistance Community sources of medical and nursing care information and help would have come from the experience of being and perhaps consulting the services of a range of healers who were skilled in using herbs, rituals, and other remedies. Predominantly however, was the countryman's wife who has often to cope with sickness or accident as best she can until professional help is available.' However, the primary site of most medical care was in the home and that, before the art of healing was concentrated in the hands of established healers, it was essentially a domestic and community activity. Many of these practitioners were peripatetic but some information gleaned from experiencing their skills and methods could have been adopted and passed on by the local people they treated. Chinnor residents have reported that their mothers would undertake their own nursing and that information had been passed down to them by their mothers. Alison King recalled her grandmother, who had extensive knowledge of plants and herbs as well as other remedies, learned from her mother, willingly passed on this knowledge to others. Alison herself was taught what was safe to eat and what to avoid.

### **Local herbalists**

A search of local papers, 1900-1949, covering the Oxfordshire area indicated an interesting cluster of herbal practitioners in Banbury, at various locations in Parson Street and, from 1913, three herbalists can be identified. T. Norton who qualified in 1870 practised at number 36 and was advertising until 1915, blood skin and nervous diseases a speciality, and claimed to have restored 'hundreds' to health. A. Mr. Dawes, also of Parsons Street, advertised from 1914-1919, particularly his lung mixture which offered 'constant relief' at 6d. and 1s. a bottle. He also advertised a booklet 'Premier Remedies: an instructive and useful booklet' free of charge, in addition, he practiced as a chiropodist. Leonard Ellis of 24 Parsons Street was advertising until 1947, whilst two other herbalists were also advertising in Banbury. In 1922 Mr. Perry of Church Lane Banbury, who also worked as a tailor, and a Mr. Still of 9, Church Lane Banbury.

### **Over the counter and home remedies**

One child aimed tonic was 'Cod Liver Oil,' much disliked by the residents, and which was a staple supplement in Chinnor. In January 1943, Chinnor WI minutes recorded that a circular from the Ministry of Health regarding the distribution of fruit juices and cod liver oil to infants and immunisations for young children had been received. The meeting agreed that this would be done through the clinic in the village.

Jim Rose was given an interesting 'tonic' when he was a child aged six. Because he was very thin the doctor said that he should have a tablespoon of cream every day, whilst Alison King remembers being given cinnamon syrup in milk by her mother.

The concept of children imbibing alcohol as being dangerous does not seem to have been part of the health ethos of the village. Derek Nixey mentioned being given hot

orange squash and whiskey for colds aged seven or eight and Percy Saw recalled, hot milk and whisky.

This concept of blood purification in the spring was an old tradition and its use was asked of the interviewees. John Neighbour reported having boiled nettles in the spring, a nettle tonic being a traditional remedy.

One of the biggest causes of ill health and death in Chinnor were lung conditions and many over-the-counter remedies addressed this and these were often referred to as tonics. Noted by a number of residents was 'Owbridges Lung Tonic', a longstanding remedy from the 1900s onwards consisting of Ipecacuanha, wine and chloroform. This product claimed to be: 'The Greatest English Remedy'. The perceived need for these products for health maintenance stems from the high infant mortality rate, and the ever-present threat of infectious diseases as well as the cost of medical care.

Many residents or their family were subjected to a dose of 'Syrup of Figs' on a regular basis. Avis Hulbert was one and said her mother was 'very keen' on it, as confirmed by her brother Derek Nixey. Rodney Turner remembered that Sunday was bath and 'Syrup of Figs' night and John Neighbour put this dosing down to the older generation being concerned about their bowels with no obvious reason. Percy Saw was not only given 'Syrup of Figs' but also brimstone and treacle which was also thought to be a general tonic.

One example of family and community help and the whole ethos of neighbour taking care of neighbour can be gleaned from an examination of the minutes of the Chinnor branch of the Women's Institute.

The minutes from the 1920s to 1940s, indicate a range of topics addressed, and what shines through is the story of a group of women with the welfare of their community at heart, and it can be seen that Chinnor took its health very seriously, there being a continuous demand for health and medical information. as the following extracts show. Following its inauguration and over the next two decades a spectrum of health and medical talks and initiatives were put in place. In January 1926 there was a talk by a Miss Adams on '*What to do in an emergency*' (unspecified) whilst in October 1928 Claire Groslett, (no title given) gave a lecture on the '*New Facts About the Prevention of Disease*' and in January 1929 a competition was run for the best article submitted on the subject of '*First Aid at Home*.'

Later that year the group identified the need to acquire a range of 'sick room requisites' for loaning out to the village and in October, along with a talk on '*Enemies of Health, Germs and their Work*,' it was suggested that home nursing lessons be held each week and that this would be put to good use by forming a sick visiting committee which was formed in 1931. In March 1932 it was decided that more information was wanted on Red Cross classes and in May, Dr. Levekus gave a talk on '*Remedies in the Home*.' In 1933 it was decided that the theme of the year would be health and Dr. Carling (a local GP) spoke of the '*Question of Health and the Good of our Country*.' Later that year there was a talk on home remedies for colds. This was followed by talks from Dr. Carling on health and Dr. Leverkusen on '*Progress of Medicine*'. In June 1934 members helped out at a health exhibition in Thame and 1935 saw Dr. Leverkusen giving a talk on female anatomy

whilst Miss Fry (no designation given) in 1936 gave a series of six talks on how to keep well.

### **The availability of remedies and importance of diet**

Before the war Britain obtained most of the necessary ingredients for medicinal use from the continent but these sources ceased at the outbreak of WW II. As in WW I, Britain turned to native sources in response to an alert being raised by the Whitechapel Hospital, in London stating that supplies of essential drugs had been practically cut off since the beginning of hostilities. In response, the director of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and The Pharmaceutical Society formed the Vegetable Drugs Committee and put plans in place to restore a supply of drugs and encouraged people to collect and dry plants found in the country side.

To implement this scheme the Committee involved organisations such as the Federation of Women's Institutes, Women's Voluntary Service, Civil Defence, schoolchildren and the scouts and guides of Britain were organised under a national plan operated at local level by a County Herb Committee. In Oxford, key to this operation was the Oxford Medical Plants Scheme which had close links with the Oxford WI of which Chinnor was a branch. Planning and co-ordination were vital since the plants had to be dried soon after harvesting. The work was exhausting if a big collection was ready and harvesting could not be delayed. One particular need was for foxgloves which were growing in abundance on the Chiltern Hills around Chinnor and in large enough quantities to be worth harvesting commercially. These plants in particular had a high digitalis content. During 1941, Oxford WI collected enough foxgloves to yield 350,000 doses of digitalis.

The Chinnor branch of the WI noted in August 1941 that the Girl Guides were willing to collect dandelion roots (a diuretic) if there was a drying centre nearby. This was followed in September when it was decided that each WI member should collect 3lbs of dandelion roots to be delivered to Mrs. White's home before being sent away for drying. In October, the branch got together to collect rosehips on the 13<sup>th</sup> and in the yearly report for 1941 it was reported that 236lbs of jam had been made and sold to the shops in the village. Rose hips were a valuable source of vitamin C since other sources were in very short supply. In March 1942 it was decided that the fruit preservation scheme was to continue and in May a Fruit Preserving Committee was formed. At this meeting a circular was discussed pointing out the value of certain medicinal plants and it was agreed to collect various varieties at different times. The collection of nettles was to start immediately and dandelion roots the weekend of June 12<sup>th</sup>. In July there was a discussion on the collecting and drying of various herbs and arrangements were made to gather rosehip leaves which would be taken to Oxford. In September two collections of foxglove leaves were made and a depot for drying had been opened in Watlington. On the ninth of September it was reported that more foxglove seeds, rosehips, raspberry leaves were sent to Oxford via the depot at Watlington.

Herbal medicine, which could be obtained freely from locally harvested plants, benefitted both ends of the social scale and has had a long and honourable tradition of providing health care to the poor and rich alike long before the advent of the NHS.

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**Yarrow** (*Achillea millefolium*), astringent, used for bruises, swellings, hypertension. Culpeper calls it nosebleed and wound wort, used by Greek and Roman armies to stop bleeding.

**Cuckoo-pint** (*Arum maculatum*), Culpeper reports its use for 'drawing forth poison' eye lotions, retained afterbirth, and it 'cleanses all manner of rotten and filthy ulcers.'

**Daisy** (*Bellis perennis*), juice used by the Roman army to soak bandages and stem bleeding. Culpeper cites its use for wounds, ulcers, swelling and 'all kinds of paines (sic) and aches.'

**White Bryony** (*Bryonia dioica*), English mandrake, Culpeper cites its use for cramps, convulsions 'running scabs and manginess'.

**Hawthorne** (*Crataegus monogyna*), evidence supports its use in hypertension and cardio vascular conditions. Culpeper records that it is good for dropsy (heart failure) and as an analgesic.

**Foxglove** (*Digitalis purpurea*), evidence supports its use in heart failure, Culpeper states it is used to clean and dry old sores and for the King's Evil. It was not until the eighteenth century that its cardiac action was noted.

**Sun spurge, petty spurge** (*Euphorbia*), evidence supports its use as an antispasmodic activities and herbalists used it for respiratory disorders, asthma, bronchitis and catarrh.

**Ash** (*Fraxinus excelsior*), bitter tonic and astringent and laxative.

**Cleavers (Clivers)** (*Galium aparine*), Culpeper advises it for adder bites and to prevent obesity.

**Avens** (*Geum urbanum*) limited evidence supports its use for diarrhoea and haemorrhage.

**Ground Ivy** (*Glechoma hederacea*) mild expectorant, anticatarrhal, astringent, diuretic anti.

**Common Ivy** (*Hedera helix*) Culpeper cites its use for diarrhoea and bloody flux.

**Stinking Iris** (*Iris foetidissima*), Culpeper advises its use for abortion, cramps, convulsions, gout and sciatica.

**Honeysuckle (*Lonicera nitida*)** Culpeper cites its use in childbirth to speed labour, relieves convulsions, cramps and palsies and as an ointment, for sunburn.  
Poppy (papaver)

**Burnet (*Pimpinella saxifrage*)**, no evidence to support use but traditionally used as an astringent, antihæmorrhagic, ulcerative colitis and acute diarrhoea.

**Greater plantain (*Lantago major*)** Culpeper says it is a herb of Mars and ‘there is hardly a martial disease it does not cure.’ Evidence supports its use in the treatment of bronchitis, antibiotic activity and hypotension.

**Selfheal (*Prunella vulgaris*)**, also known as carpenters heal and used for bruised or cut fingers. Culpeper claims it kills worms, helps gout, cramp and convulsions provokes urine and helps all joint aches.

**Elder (*Sambucus nigra*)** Traditionally used for colds catarrh, sinusitis. Evidence supports its anti inflammatory properties, anti viral activity and diuretic properties.

**Dandelion (*Taraxacum agg.*)**, Traditional use as a diuretic and laxative and for cholecystitis. Culpeper cites its use for opening ‘the passages of urine for young and old’ and also for ‘consumption or an evil disposition of the whole body.’

**Lime tree (*Tilia spp.*)**, evidence supports its use for its antispasmodic, diuretic and sedative properties.

**Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*)** traditional use is for skin conditions, antispasmodic and expectorant.

**Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*)**, Culpeper prescribes it for joint pains and for bleeding, to ‘provoke urine and expel stones’. Evidence supports its use for rheumatism and joint pains having anti inflammatory properties.

**Germander Speedwell (*Veronica chamaedrys*)**, Culpeper suggests that it is good for coughs, consumptions, barrenness, the stone and pestilential fevers.

**Early dog violet (*Viola reichenbachiana*)** Culpeper pairs this with the dog violet and suggests its use as a poultice for inflammations and swellings, also good for jaundice and the falling sickness in children.

Also affecting Chinnor’s medical care was the fact that it was not only the active medical ingredient which was in short supply during the war, drug binding substances such as sucrose, glycerine and cod liver oil were also restricted. An article in the *BMJ* regarding the *National War Formulary, 1941* pointed out, that economy in alcohol was essential and alternatives to alcohol were suggested for preserving medical instruments. Liver extracts were restricted to patients with pernicious anaemia. Malt extract was restricted to children and tuberculous patients. The Formulary also contained a number of products which should be ‘prescribed with particular regard to economy’. Even by 1947

the *National (War) Formulary* stated that: 'Existing conditions make it imperative to exercise the strictest economy in prescribing certain drugs and preparations. Many, of importance in medicine, are also required to assist the nation's economic recovery.' Still restricted were alcohol, bismuth, distilled water, glycerine, liquid paraffin, oils and fats (which were needed for food and other purposes) sugars only for paediatric medicines.

### **Home Remedies and diet**

Against this background of limited and often expensive medication, home remedies were frequently employed. Some of these remedies are recounted here. Jim Rose remembers his mother visiting the sick in the nearby villages taking a basket containing items such as calves foot jelly,( very nutritious) goose grease for rubbing on the chest and homemade butter and farm eggs.<sup>1</sup> Avis Hulbert remembered that her mother only called the doctor if the condition was beyond her knowledge. Only a couple of residents were given special food when they were ill, Anthony Harris was given raw eggs in hot milk, Daphne Folley was given bread and milk whilst Val Weeks remembers having to 'get on with it' and Rodney Turner was 'not pandered to' when ill.

Others reported that they ate what was there, nothing special. In addition to the over the counter remedies, residents have recounted a number of home remedies used by their family. Jean White recalled hot water and black current jam for colds, camphorated oil for chests and eucalyptus oil whilst John Neighbour recalled goose grease for chests and Rodney Turner mentioned friar's balsam again for chest infections. Jean Braginton remembered hot lemon and honey for sore throats feet in mustard and cold water. It was not only the residents who resorted to home remedies. Because of the cost of veterinary medicine Jim Rose recounted several treatments for farm animals. One farmer treated milk fever (successfully) by pumping air into the udder which would get the cow onto her feet in a couple of hours. If cows aborted their calves too early a goat was introduced to the herd. Unfortunately, this did not work as the goat chased the terrified cows who got out of their field and could not be stopped before they reached Thame.

These treatments and remedies were all supported by a very healthy diet of fresh food including own grown fruit and vegetables from allotments, chickens and meat from slaughtered pigs (most homes had one), rabbits and not much in the way of sweets and cakes.

Food production in general was an, essential part of maintaining health as well as being a patriotic duty during the war and the Parish council kept a close eye on the use of Chinnor's allotments. The rallying cry of 'Dig for Victory' was sounded in 1941 and every available horticultural land or park land was ploughed for crops.

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