

BLOODROOT, SWEAT AND TEARS

Or, how good old-fashioned home remedies drove me to drink

By NATALIE ST. JOHN
COAST WEEKEND

American scientists declared victory over the measles virus 19 years ago. It was gone for good, they said. But as any child of the 1980s knows, villains never really die — they just keep on terrorizing camp counselors and frisky teenagers in increasingly improbable sequels.

Set in Vancouver, Wash., *Outbreak 2019: Full-Blown Measles* is a straight-to-video B movie about a group of superstitious parents who accidentally resurrect a long-dead virus, then fight it using essential oils, vitamin A and Facebook memes about big pHARMa. As the undead disease hopscoches its way from one unvaccinated household to the next threatening to give babies encephalitis, terrified pregnant women sequester themselves inside their subdivisions. Nearly all of the casualties are children.

Kitchen witchery

While waiting to see if “Full Blown” will be coming to a theater near us, we’ve been dealing with a more mundane virus: the common cold. The other day I heard a rumor that so many kids were sick in Ilwaco, Wash., that administrators considered closing school for a day so they could douse the whole place in disinfectant.

While a cold lacks the spine-tingling thrills and visual drama of a measles outbreak, it’s pretty unlikely to kill anyone. Antibiotics are useless against viruses, and, as demonstrated by the measles comeback, undoing decades of medical progress is hugely trendy right now. So really, it seemed like the perfect time to try out some old-fashioned cold remedies.

I personally think western medicine is a useful innovation, but I get the appeal of DIY healthcare. Making herbal remedies is a lot like cooking, but without the pressure to make anything taste good. It feels witchy and mystical and talismanic. It makes you feel like you’re one of the ones who will not just survive the apocalypse, but come



Damian Mulinix

With cold and flu season still gripping the nation, it’s a good time to review home remedies, old and new. Some things, like herbal tea, are still recommended, while heroin is not.

HEARTHFIRE & BRIMSTONE

out the other side with a thriving farm and a nice sideline in homespun dresses.

Sweat it out

My boss at the Chinook Observer lent me his 1873 “Receipt Book,” written by Dr. A.W. Chase, Ferrier and Bee Keeper, so I could see how people treated colds back when germ theory was still considered a wacky fad, like wearing overalls backwards.

I had to laugh as I read Chase’s 146-year-old advice, because he relied heavily on several things crunchy types have “discovered” in recent years, such as “beef tea” — now exalted as a miracle healing substance called “bone broth,” and “essences” — essential oils. What’s old is new, what’s new is old. We are living in very strange times indeed.

Dr. Chase felt strongly that sweat was both the cause and cure for just about every ill. All too often, he said, men would stop in the midst of cutting wood to chat with their neighbors about “neighborhood scan-

sweat, the body would draw them in. If all the waylaid sweat soaked into the head or chest, the inevitable result was a cold.

In an era when underthings were made of wool, the sweat-made-me-sick theory was surely ripe for exploitation by men trying to explain their social diseases to their wives.

The Hippocratic what?

The key to treatment was, you guessed it, “exciting a free perspiration” by means of “sweating powders,” herbal foot baths and a uniquely Victorian torture method known as the “Rum Sweat.” This involved pouring rum into a saucer and placing it under a chair, where the naked patient sat. The caregiver would ignite the alcohol, then use blankets to make a little tent around the patient. If, after 30 minutes, the cold-sufferer was not engulfed in flames, they were to crawl into a bed made up with hot blankets. Alternately, the afflicted could be “packed” into a tightly wrapped cocoon of hot, wet sheets for up to two hours.

It was at this point that I began to hope Dr. Chase was better at shoeing horses and keeping bees than he was at medicine, though I was not optimistic, as the bee-keeping chapter included a section dedicated to dispelling the apparently widespread myth that African-Americans can’t keep bees because the bees will attack them. He even included a first-hand account from an elderly black lady-beekeeper who assured readers that she only got stung the regular amount.

Fighting ‘poisons’ with poison

I read on because I wanted to know what he had to say about alleviating specific cold symptoms. Dr. Chase believed coughs would inevitably turn into tuberculosis if not treated aggressively.

In between sweats, patients were to take a mixture of butter, honey, good vinegar and pepper several times a day. He also recommended three to six daily doses of his special recipe cough syrup, a combination of anise and almond oils, turpentine and laudanum, a preparation of opium suspended in alcohol. As if an elixir that could clean paintbrushes and get you stoned out of your gourd wasn’t enough, it also included ipecac, which can rapidly induce forceful vomiting in large doses; digitalis, a plant that



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President Abe Lincoln was treated with a ‘rum sweat,’ which was thought to purge the body of toxins.

dals, politics and the price of pork.” It never ended well. After 30 minutes of recklessly exposing their sweaty hides to the air, they’d fall sick. Failure to “re-establish perspiration,” the good doctor said, could only make matters worse.

Being idle after any sweat-inducing occupation was perilous because instead of “throwing off” toxic substances through