ARCHAEOLOGY PAPERS

ARCHAEOLOGY BRANCH
Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement

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THE ABORIGINAL AND HIS MEDICINE
QUEST
by
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NOTES ON AUTHOR

Stan began his association with Queensland as keeper of the collection for the University of Queensland, Geology Department.

Ever at the beginning of things, he was one of the foundation members of the Anthropological Society of Victoria prior to coming to Queensland. This was followed with his becoming a foundation member of The Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, and the Anthropological Society of Queensland. He is also a member of the Prehistoric Society and on his retirement he became an associate member of the Queensland Museum. He is also a member of the Honorary Wardens Service with the Archaeology Branch.

Stan has had many papers published in the Queensland Heritage and Queensland Naturalist. He is now actively involved in all research aspects on the Anthropology and Archaeology in Queensland.
In considering a medicine chest, one thinks also of doctors and disease. The Aboriginal had all three, but we should first consider the doctor as he is the person in the three part association.

Howitt (1887) has much to say concerning the Doctor or Blackfellow Doctor which terms he states are always used in Australia for these men of the tribe who profess to have supernatural powers. He, however, uses the term "Medicine Man" for, as he says, if by the term "Doctor" we mean a person who uses some means for curing diseases, then the term is not strictly correct for the powers these men claim are not solely those of healing or causing disease but also such powers that may generally be spoken of as magical.

These "Doctors" are often far more than the cunning cheats one might believe them to be (i.e. they could influence others to their own personal benefit) and it is quite certain that they believe more or less in their own powers; this belief is probably due to the belief they have in the powers of other similar Doctors.

For this discussion, however, our Doctors are those who attempt at some healing effects and so we pass over those Wizzards who produced illness.

One of the Doctors major functions is to counteract the effect of spells or practices of others in their own class and thus have provided the patient.

A common procedure in treatment is to suck the affected part or a selected part of the body and then to exhibit some foreign body as having been extracted; this is indicated as being the cause of the trouble. A variant of this procedure is the puffing out of wind after sucking and indicating that by this means the evil has been expelled.

There may also be various manipulations, pinchings, squeezings, etc., to ease the pain. In some cases the poison or evil inside is expelled via a string or a stick held by the doctor who still sucks, but this time on the stick or the string, and again spits out the evil in the form of blood.

Charms may be sung, some of which are very powerful and not to be lightly used; however, on occasion such is the power of suggestion that the patient gets better. It would appear that much is made of the successes and little said of the failures.

Some of the "get well" suggestions have a faith act almost biblical and one such is recorded by Howitt (1887 p.40) as follows: "a throwing stick, to which Yaruk or the personal association item used to induce illness was attached is held by the wizard who is setting the spell and must be sought for by the doctor who is to cure the patient".
At times it is suggested this search takes him outside the earth's surface. However, the part of special interest to us is in the following quotation: 
"Giving the Yaruk to the sick man, he would say to him something like this: You go and put this in a running stream to wash all the mung (magic) out of it and I will go up aloft and put this throwing stick in some water up there".

Again, at times, such was the power of auto-suggestion and the confidence in the doctor, that people close to death were brought back to life when their ghost-spirit (murup) was captured as he left the body and was returned to the dying man by the doctor.

There were qualifications necessary in this exacting business. Thus in the tribal days in Gippsland, Victoria, the head man of the Woiworung tribe was a man who "spoke straight and did not injure people". With the coastal Murring people the head man had also to be a wizard (Gommera). The qualifications for a real Gommera were grey-headedness; the ability to speak several dialects or even languages; to be skilful in arms, and above all, he had to be able to bring things up out of himself. So here we almost seem to have a primitive Hypocritic oath and considerable training at the university level of those days.

Of course, any doctor worth his salt did not work for nothing and presents were certainly given by those who benefited from his art - weapons, rugs, implements, and other such things of value came to him as did a share in game foods caught. The initial training for a Medicine Man varies from place to place; at times there appears almost spiritual or divine power which transforms a man into a doctor (e.g. Murring tribe, et.) and on the Lower Lachlan and the Murray, there is a suggested death and subsequent re-birth to the position; and of course, again there are many variants.

Howitt also records (1887 p.49) how the early training of a "Blackfellow doctor" began.

As quite a small boy the "doctor to be" was taken from the camp into the bush to begin training and he tells of his experiences thus: "Two large quartz crystals were placed against my breast and they "vanished into me". I do not know how they went, but I felt them going through me like warmth."

He gave the following reason: "This was to make a clever man of me; able to bring things up". He was given things like quartz crystals in water and recalled they "looked like ice and the water tasted sweet". Some time after this he began to see things that others could not see.

After the initiation ceremony he records experiences such as entering a grave where dead men rubbed him all over to make him clever and who gave him quartz crystals; as following a tiger snake (his totem) through several tree trunks which opened to let them through, eventually into a great hole in the ground filled with tiger snakes who rubbed themselves against him to make him a clever man and a doctor (wulla mullung); as being set astride a thread and drawn aloft by a bird up through the clouds to the sky and entering therein through "the place where the doctors go through, and it kept opening and shutting very quickly". Safely through this opening he saw Bajame (the supernatural being to whom this group of Aborigines attribute the institution of their social organisation and the invention of their arts) sitting in his camp. He described Bajame as a very old man with a long beard sitting with his legs under him and with two great quartz crystals extending from his shoulders to the sky above him.
In all these adventures on training journeys he was accompanied by his father. When they returned he went back to the bush and began to "bring up things", i.e. he began to exhibit the powers of a doctor. He did not continue as such for he fell ill and his powers left him. Certainly here we had self delusion at the very least and it is not surprising that he fell ill with such visions going through his mind.

There are many such records in similar style and one wonders whether hypnosis and/or drugs played a part in this training.

MacPherson (1903) in writing of the natives of the New England district, N.S.W., tells something of the education of up and coming Medicine Men or, as he calls them, Students in Medicine. The formal education started at the great Bora Initiation Ceremonies with the old doctors and warriors imparting information to the many youths from different tribes who received their instruction together.

The doctors and warriors (3-6 in number) took the lads away to teach them and there were progressive examinations, thus: "From time to time their proficiency was tested; they were sent to observe and diagnose cases of illness - being reprimanded for their mistakes - until the required degree of competency was gained".

When fully qualified to practise, the young man "must needs comfort himself with circumspection" or he was in trouble. If his instructors considered him unwarrantably zealous, i.e. if his professional zeal was considered too great, he was reported to the tribal chief who "if he found the accusation sustained" ordered him to be put to death.

Incidentally, in the Yakumbal Tribe, the patient might insist upon several medical men being called together to consider his case, thus limiting personality clashes between patient and doctor.

The work of the doctor was mainly surgical and associated treatment of wounds. In illness problems, there was a physical examination to locate the seat of the disease and then the doctor bit off a small leafy branch, blew over it and sprinkled it with a powder from a bag he carried and then pressed the leafy twig well into the body at the seat of the illness. On occasions other doctors might be called in to help him press on the leaves and by this means, the drug rapidly spread through the system and soon effected a cure. If the person felt sore at any particular place, the doctor often inserted a "cigar-shaped needle" into the tender place (a painless operation it is told) and through this needle, the doctor would suck out the pebble or other like object causing the illness.

Moving into Central Australia we have a similar story and I quote from a comment on a paper by J.E. Cawte (1964) with the title "Australian Ethno-psychiatry: The Wikiri Doctor". The area of the Wikiri extends for some 200 miles around the central western border of the Northern Territory and the people are transferring from a hunting and foraging existence. In 1964 there were over 700 people in the area and it was noted there was an increasing population.
In the study undertaken some eight practising doctors and one thirteen years old trainee doctor were studied. It was of interest to note that the boy trainee had no medical lore despite his ambitions. There was no reason to doubt that the doctors were all reasonable altruistic and intelligent men, but they were not men of high degree. Also as was to be expected some were clearly more capable and resourceful than others and some were more scrupulous. The Walbiri doctor was not concerned with "Materia Medica". Here the domestic remedies for conditions of snake bite through to vomiting are the shared knowledge of the people as a whole and in particular, of the old women. It could be said that the Walbiri doctor was "the socially appointed interpreter of sickness in the light of tribal belief".

The doctor here possesses a genus or familiar spirit that sets him apart from the rest of the people and enables him to practise medicine; this factor he calls his "mabanba" or his dreaming. "Mabanba", thumbnail sized beings living in the doctor's body, invisible to the rest of the tribe, appear to the doctor as clear or white in colour very similar to crystals of quartz, but differing from these in being soft like rubber and possessing animal qualities. They have a little ticking voice, somewhat watch-like, which may be heard by everyone in the camp but which is only understood by the doctor. Mabanba are without legs or wings but can travel quickly through the air or under the ground. Their normal resting position is either in the doctor's belly, arms, chest and head. In the latter location, they tend to be along the strings (?)(the fibre track) of the brain.

The doctor extracts them for action by "pulling" them after striking his body in the presence of the patient.

In diagnosis the Mabanba are generally "pulled" and cast out in selected directions where they eavesdrop until they detect a singing culprit (remember illness is due to the person being "sung") and then they fly back to the doctor's head and tell him of their findings.

The Mabanba may leave the doctor on their own volition and fly like butterfly around the camp in the search for evidence.

If the source of illness or sorcery is thought to be some distance away, the doctor may use his womera to systematically cast the mabanba to various points on the horizon. Eventually it fails to return from one such cast and thus knowing the direction of the source of the trouble, the doctor hastens to the area and gathers bushes for a therapeutic application to the body of the sick person.

In therapy the mabanba is applied to the sick person's body by rubbing and insertion, consequently the hole in the belly through which a poison stick entered to cause the illness would be plugged by a mabanba (remember these items are invisible to all but the doctor). Insanity is cured by the mabanba being inserted into the "temples to destroy the snake or scorpion that has been sung into the brain to cause the trouble".
In the Walbiri there are no complex rites or ordeals through which the novitiate must pass, the office of doctor being dependent on the possession of the mabanba which is usually inherited. It would appear this happens just before the previous owner dies and only then does the son see the object for the first time.

However, there are other records that do not show a direct descent. One doctor tells how, as a young man, a shooting star from the midnight sky pierced his side and deposited mabanba and another tells of an adult who, whilst working on a cattle station, felt the mabanba jump into his belly. An old doctor confirmed its presence by the ticking sound and then he was virtually in business for himself.

The doctor is declining in the Walbiri and this, in part at least, is due to the white man and his way of doing things and effecting cures. We have the anomaly of the Walbiri themselves, whilst not entirely forsaking their own doctors, also visiting the sick bay at settlements.

New doctors are not being trained to any extent, in fact, the earlier mentioned trainee boy was the only one in 1964 and his knowledge of Walbiri medical lore was negligible.

The present day loss of prestige of doctors is given by the Rev. Hay (1923 p.12) who states "Through the advent of the mission, the medicine man no longer has use for his primitive skills. Indeed, the present generation ignores and even despises him, though superstition dies hard with some".

Yet another side to the story of the Medicine Man is given by our Society's Co-Founder and first Secretary, Dr. L.P. Winterbotham, in his Jackson Lecture (1951) with the title "Primitive Medical Art and Primitive Men of Australia". Here he shows that the Medicine Man was chosen by the elders of the tribe and in conjunction with the existing medicine man as being fit and proper persons for the position, or were men who claimed they had an inner vision or experience of being called to the profession and if this claim was accepted by the qualified man, then he too was eventually trained.

All concerned had to undergo training in the art before being entrusted with the lore of the profession. It is shown that the Medicine Man is a clear thinker and a man of decision, one who believed he had psychic powers and who acted on this belief. They had to acquire skill in slight of hand and in ventriloquism; they required training in the proper methods of rubbing and sucking; in the examination of dead bodies; in conducting inquests and questioning the corpse and in seeing spirits.

With all this training, the Medicine Man was usually reserved in his attitude and was well liked. He enjoyed no special privileges, lived the ordinary family and social life of the tribe and took part in the regular ceremonial functions.

His task was to restore faith in life where that faith had been lost and to restore life itself by getting rid of sickness. Only the very young or the very old were admitted as having died from natural causes, other deaths were generally assumed to be the result of evil magic from another tribe.
It is certain that due to this belief the fatal results of contact with infectious illness, e.g. pulmonary tuberculosis, leprosy, etc., produced the decimation of many tribes. One such practice that certainly helped in this was the inhalation of the last breath of a dying person, thinking that by this means they could absorb his strength and virtue.

Hygiene was little understood by the natives and urine and excreta were regarded as part of the essence of the body. These were not burned as fire would kill the body essence. Camp was shifted when flies and smells became too much or when food supplies became scarce.

It is interesting to note that even with this lack of hygiene, W.H. Flynn (in Winterbotham, 1951), states that very few deaths occurred as a result of child birth.

The art of surgery was practised but only to a limited extent and apparently only in relation to the flesh. I can find no evidence that suggests anything like the trephining operation of Melanesia and other places.

Winterbotham (1951, p.6) suggests the only operations performed by the Aborigines were those of circumcision and subincision. He also makes the point that both of these were ceremonial rites as well. In the case of circumcision, the bare backs of two or three stooping men act as the operating table, the patient cum initiate is held down by a man jumping on to his chest. Other men hold his arms and legs which are forced asunder and pressed downwards. The mouth is gagged with a ball of hair string and at the critical moment of operation, in one tribe the boy was stunned by a club blow to the head; in another tribe, given a dose of pituri to stupefy him. The operating knife was usually a freshly broken splinter of quartzite paper bark, clay, emu fat and hot ashes to staunch the bleeding. The initiate then went into the bush until the wound was healed.

Knut Dahl (1895) records a post-operational practice south of the Daly River, thus: "the bandage consists of a layer of thin paper bark next to the wound, then a little mat of woven grass and then an outer layer of paper bark and hair twine. The wound is in a state of inflammation and seemed to cause great suffering. A primitive but effective steam bath has been set up thus: A paper bark with a hole about two inches in diameter burnt through it about the centre. Stones were being heated in a fire and when they were glowing, wet moss was brought from a nearby lagoon. The wet moss was placed in the cleared out hole, two to three red hot stones were thrown into the hole and covered with more moss and some water was added. The sheet of bark was replaced and a column of steam came up through the hole in the bark. Bandages were removed and the boy laid down over the hole, with the organ inserted through the hole in the bark. He was kept there between ten to fifteen minutes, being held in place by one of his fellow tribesmen who stretched out full length on top of him. It was noted that several times during the period of the steam bath treatment "a convulsive shivering several times shook the Aboriginal's body".

Macleay (1882) in a paper on operations among Australian Aborigines tells of a much more complicated sub-incision operation called "Mîka" which has been referred to as "the terrible operation". He also gives details of an ovariotomy; both operations occurring in the area from the Diamantina to the Herbert River.
Cox (1881) records that on the Cloncurry River, south of Normanton, there is a belief among some white settlers that many of the gins undergo some operation to prevent their bearing children, but this statement could not be checked. However, the gins frequently underwent operations by which the nipples were cut off the breasts but here also no reason for this action was given.

One extraordinary happening is recorded by Daisy Bates (1938, p.78) who tells of a Chinese half-caste born with no eyelids at Jerromunggup, West Australia. An Aboriginal "had performed a surgical operation with a skill and intelligence rare in a native. He had pulled out the skin covering of the eyes, held it vertically and slit it horizontally. As the cut edges healed, they had actually developed lashes".

In the above discussion, we have seen some attempt to reduce pain and the introduction of a post-operative resting period. The Aboriginal treatment of wound quite severe by white man's standards, seems casual, yet the grave danger of sepsis seldom occurred.

One such treatment for deep wounds is noted by Winterbotham (p.7) thus: "large eagle hawk's feather and in some cases other bird's feathers were laid in the bottom of the wound and over these powdered charcoal or ashes from the fire, and the cavity was then filled in with pipe clay. (This material often being carried around with them for just this purpose). Over this was placed a pad of soft tea-tree bark which was kept in place by binding of possum fur string. The dressings were changed as required but were kept on until the wound contents were gradually extruded. The eagle hawk's feather was preserved for further use as such items were only obtained with considerable difficulty".

Regarding fractures, which must have been fairly common, there is a difference of opinion in the various writings which may or may not denote our lack of knowledge: thus J.R.B. Love (1936 p.73) writing of the Worora tribe of North West Western Australia, stated that: "none of the Worora have any notion of setting a bone." A personal communication to Dr. Winterbotham from the Rev. W. MacKenzie (Winterbotham, 1951, p.7) told how in the Gulf Country among the Wik and Titti people, fractures were treated by encasing the limb in bark cut from the messmate tree. This method was in use long before the white man came.

Dinning (1949) reporting on forty-nine fractured Aboriginal bones in the collections of the South Australian Museum that he had examined, stated that anatomical restoration in them would be considered good even if judged by modern European standards.

In the Port Keats area, North West Australia, the shin bone of a dead man was used as a splint for a leg fracture and similarly, a fore-arm bone for an arm fracture. There was supposed to be some special virtue in the bones of a dead person used in this way.

It would seem then that among some tribes at least, there was a knowledge of the need of fracture immobilization. Possibly here too we have the beginnings of the "specialist" in certain treatment.

Having looked at the Doctor and what might be called accident and surgical cases, let us now turn to disease.
It would seem that Stephens (1980) had quite a point when he wrote "Their diseases were simple and few". This, of course, referring to the pre and early days of white man association - such did not remain the case for very long and common illnesses introduced by the white man (who had considerable immunity to them) decimated once virile tribes to extinction.

Early writers have listed some of the ills the Aboriginal suffered pre white man. William Thomas (1861) in a report to the Parliament of Victoria, lists: rheumatism, boils, skin-eruptions, colds, dysentery, wounds and burns as being effectively treated with lotions and decoctions of wattle bark and gum. Against this Bickness (1895) states: "The diseases amongst the blacks are not numerous: colds and a throat infection are quite unknown, but in wet seasons they suffer from ague and rheumatism and from terrible skin diseases, chiefly contracted from the white man."

So a change in disease pattern came soon after the contacts with the Malays from whom it seems small pox was introduced on more than one occasion. A very complete review of "Disease Among the Australian Aborigines" by J. Burton Cleland was published in 1928 and the history of this small pox introduction and others since white occupation is well documented. Now, of course, the Aboriginal is heir to most diseases of the world and through them has been reduced to a remnant of the numbers of past days, with many of the tribes completely extinct.

The Medical Chest and Medical Practices with Its Contents

(N.B. Where not otherwise noted, the records listed are taken from Roth, 1903 who collated earlier writings).

Stomach Ache, Diarrhoea:

Swamp mud is eaten as a cure by Pennifather R. Natives. Clay or mud pills two to three at a time are taken at Boulia for diarrhoea. The very resinous bark of *Canarvon australosicurn, F.v.M* is rubbed and broken up in water to form a milky solution; after removal of the solids the liquid is drunk. (Pennifather R.)

The Bark of *Sarcocephalus cordatus Mig*.

Is broken into small pieces and eaten, vomiting occurs and this supposedly cures a sore belly among the Koko-minni of the Palmer River.

Coughs and Colds, Congestion

Salt water as a cure is drunk by the blacks around the mouth of the Tully River; a tea-like decoction of *Hibiscus sp.* was used in the Cloncurry district; a similar decoction of *Mentha australis R. Br.* was taken in the North West districts of Queensland. Young leaves of *Melaleuca Leucadendron, Linn* were bruised in water and the resulting liquid was drunk in the Mitchell River district. The chest cold was eased by chewing the *Butter Orchid* (Dawson 1955) and the common cold relieved by chewing the stem of the *Umbrella Plant* at Yarrabah.

Congestion

Here we have more of a treatment thus: the leaves of *Phyllanthus urinaria Linn. var.* were chewed or soaked in water and then rubbed into and placed on cuts made on top of the forehead at the Pennifather R.
Fevers, High Temperatures

The bark of Cassytha glabella R. Br. is made into a sort of tea by lengthy soaking in water. On occasion the leaves are used in the same way (Pennifather and Batavia R.) The leaves of young trees of Eucalyptus tetradonta F. v.M. are bruised and rubbed in water contained in a wooden receptacle until the water is green and thick. The mixture is drunk. Mitchell, Gilbert and Norman Rivers.

Portions of the plant Moschosma polystachyum Benth are mixed with water and taken internally, Mitchell and Finders R. The leaves of Ocimum sanctum, Linn are similarly treated at Cloncurry and Mitchell R. The leaves of Loranthus quandong, Ländl are bruised in water and the resulting liquor drunk and so too are portions of Pterocaulon glandulosus, Benth and Hook used.

Dysentery

The pseudobulb of Cymbidium albudiflorum, F.v.M is chewed. Tully R. The bark of Eucalyptus tesselaris F.v.M is soaked in water and the liquor drunk at Palmer R. The leaves of Grewia polygama, Roeb. are either chewed or made into a decoction and drunk. N.B. used by both blacks and whites around Normanton.

Toothache

A wad of Tribulus cistoides, Lin is kept between the gum and the cheek along the base of a bad tooth.

Ear Ache

The leaves of Aegiceras majus, Gaertn are squeezed or boiled and the juice or fluid is dropped into the ear. The use is confined to females only. Pennifather R.

Sore Eyes, Sandy Blight, etc.

The leaves of Alphitonia excelsa Reissek are laid on the eyes. Pennifather R. The whole plant of Andropogon bombycinus R. Br. is soaked in water which takes on an aromatic smell and is then used as a wash for sore eyes. Palmer R. Masticated Gw leaves are applied as a poultice (Stephens 1890, p.491)

Headache

The young shoots of Calamus caryotoides Mart are eaten, Bloomfield R. The young leaves of Eucalyptus tetradonta, F.v.M are prepared as noted under Fevers. The young leaves of Melaleuca leucadendron, Linn are bruised in water and the resulting liquor drunk. Mitchell R. etc. The fresh leaves of Pterocaulon glandulosus, Benth and Hook are smelt or boiled up in water and the liquor drunk. Kundara. Eucalyptus bark after being hammered and pounded is soaked in water part. Fairly general.
Rheumatism and Allied Aches and Pains

The inner bark of *Eucalyptus prunosa*, Schain., is stripped and tightly wound around the body and then soaked with water, the patient sitting in water at the same time. Cloncurry. Emu oil is used as an embrocation (Stephens 1890).

Constipation, Stoppages, etc.

The oily mess obtained by boiling a young stingray's liver in water in a Melo shell is considered a sure cure for constipation. Pennifather R. The gum of *Eucalyptus terminalis* P.v.M is mixed with water and the liquor is drunk. Palmer R.

Euphorbia

Various species of this plant are frequently used for relief in difficult or painful micturition. Boulia.

Skin Disease

The whole plant of *Stinga curvifolia*, Benth. after being chewed or soaked in water, is rubbed into the sores. Pennifather R.

Veneral Sores and Diseases

The powdered gum of *Eucalyptus corymbosa* Sm. is dusted on veneral sores and the gum boiled in water is taken internally. Boulia, Cloncurry, Upper Georgina and Leichhardt-Selwyn districts. The boiled decoction of leaves of *Eucalyptus resinifera* Sm. are drunk and the inner bark is rubbed into the sores. Kandara people between Staaten and Nassau R.

Abortions

McLaren (1926) records an aborted pregnancy that clearly suggested a wide knowledge of abortifacients.

General Pains and Sickness - Tonics, Universal Remedies

The bark of *Excoecaria parvifolia* P.v.M is smashed up in water in a wooden trough and heated by hot stones. The wash is applied externally to all parts of the body and it is rubbed in. Cloncurry, Mitchell R.

*Anaphalium lutea-album*, Linn.

Is made into a drink. Mitchell R.

*Heliotropium ovalifolium* Forsk.

Bruised in water, the resulting liquor is used as a drink and a wash over the head and body.

The young leaves of *Melaleuca leucadendron*, Linn. are bruised in water and the liquid drunk. Mitchell R. etc.
The leaves and branches of *Plectranthus congetus*, *R. Br.* are crushed in water and the liquor drunk as a remedy for general internal complaints. Mitchell R.

The bark of *Berringtonia racemosa*, Gaudich is hammered and dipped into boiling water and dabbed all over the sick person. Bloomfield R.

The bark of *Careya australis*, F.v.M is boiled and the decoction rubbed all over the body. Kundara Aboriginals.

The outer bark of *Erythrophloeum Laboucheiri*, F.v.M is soaked in water for some hours and the solution rubbed all over the body. Pennifather R.

The nuts of *Calophyllum inophyllum*, Linn. are broken, finely ground up with red pigment on a stone mixed with water and rubbed all over the patient's body with a special application to the site of the pain.

The stalks of the young leaves of *Alsophila australis*, are roasted and eaten as a tonic after any form of sickness. Tully R.

Green ants and their larvae are either eaten raw or after preparation for anything from diarrhoea through to common colds and also as a general pick-me-up.

**Minor Sores, Scratches, Boils, etc.**

The reddish outer bark of the root of *Capparis uberiflora*, F.v.M is scraped off and the shavings soaked in water. The mixture is dabbed onto sores and scratches on the legs. Pennifather R.

The whole plant of *Ipomoea angustifolia*, Jacq. is chewed or soaked in water and the pad placed on the sore. Pennifather R.

The fresh fruit of *Tabernaemontana orientalis*, R. Br. is rubbed over sores. Cape Grafton.

**GENERAL FIRST AID PRACTICES:**

**Removal of Splinters**

Bolam (1924 p.83) tells of a young boy having run a large splinter into his finger and of his father biting it out. He first gradually worked the splinter to the edge of the skin with the teeth and having got it this far, he then pulled it out with his teeth.

**Insect Bites, Etc.**

Bolam (1924 pp.81-2) tells of a peculiar method of curing the irritation caused by the sting or bite of insects, etc. and for the removing of pimples, itch and such like. They place in the fire the end of a nice little stick about one inch in diameter and when it is well alight, they blow out the flame, leaving the end glowing. The bite, pimple, etc is then wet with spittle and the red hot stick is held as close as possible to it. The drawing action of the heat is immediately experienced and the itch disappears.
Dressing for Wounds, etc.

Iguana, Snake, etc. fat or grease mixed more or less with mud and dirt is commonly used throughout the north west districts as a dressing for cuts and wounds of all descriptions. Wounds are never allowed to heal by "first intention".

Haemorrhage is cured by mud or clay being jabbed into the incised surface; on occasion, charcoal is used for the same purpose.

The Brisbane blacks often simply washed the wound with water and scraped the surface with a stick until the blood stopped flowing. Wood ashes or bloodwood charcoal were used to cover the wound, if neither of these was available ordinary earth was used (Petrie 1932).

The outer bark of Erythrophloeum labouceriti F.v.M is steeped in water for some hours and the solution is rubbed into spear wounds and it is noted that the surrounding skin appears to dry up. (Pennifather R.) The milky juice of the young shoots of Ficus scabra G. Forst is often applied to wounds. The leaves of Pterocaulon glandulosus Benth & Hook are used for stuffing up and rubbing over spear wounds in the arms and legs by the Koko-minnit people and the charcoal from the wood of Grevillea striata R. Br. is used to stop the haemorrhage in certain spear wounds.

For fracture of the limbs, two to four sticks in the rough were tied on a broken arm or leg and were left for two to three months. The value of these splints was often lessened by the fact that they were not long enough to keep the adjacent joints at rest. On the Tully, many superficial longitudinal incisions were made over the actual fracture, short pieces of wood or bone were tied along and over the wounds and the whole was bandaged by Lawyer vine (Calamus).

Heat Therapy

(Petrie 1932) has recorded that in the Brisbane district a treatment for headache was to place the head between two heated stones covered with a possum skin rug.

Snake Bite

In the Boulia and Cloncurry districts, two ligatures are placed around the limb bitten, thus if on the hand the ligatures were above and below the elbow, if on the leg then above and below the knee. It was not known if this action was for relief of pain or arresting haemorrhage. Suction is applied to the wound and a vapour bath treatment given in a pit large enough to contain the victim. The normal hot stones, leaves and branches sprinkled with water are used and the victim lies on the heated bed, becomes enveloped in perspiration and falls asleep for two to three hours, wakes up "refreshed", has a "spit" and is quite recovered.
At Yarrabah (Dawson 1955) snake bite was cut into with the saw-like Yakal leaf until the blood flows freely from the wound; native string was tied in two places, above the cut, beeswax was applied to the infected part and this was left on until it fell off. The inside bark of Eucalyptus microtheca F.v.M was beaten up, heated and used as a poultice for snake bite in the Cloncurry district, and the bark of Sarcocophalus cordatus Mog. is eaten to produce vomiting and relief from snake bite by the Koko-mini people.

Liniments, Lotions, etc.

Throughout North West Queensland human blood is a common item used in various obscure infections and internal pains of one sort or another. The blood is removed from any part of any other healthy man, never a woman. Collected in a wooden trough, the blood is dabbed all over the patient's body using a bunch of emu feathers. His "gin" or a male friend rubs it in with the flat of the hands, an operation which might take fifteen minutes or more. The patient might also drink some of the blood.

Sweat removed from under the armpits, smeared in a similar manner is believed to have wonderful curative properties and is specially valuable when the patient is close to death.

Fats from the iguana or snake, etc. employed as a liniment and rubbed into tired and aching limbs generally afforded speedy relief.

Fever and other obscure cases are often treated by a thorough massage all over with the green mush formed by Melaleuca leaves soaked in water. At times the bark of the same tree may also be used (Palmer R.)

Or the Bloomfield River, young women often suffer from an infection of the foot and toes and this may even prove fatal through blood poisoning. Male urine used as a wash is one treatment practised.

Poultices, Fermentations, etc.

Bruises, sprains, aches and pains in general are treated by these means. Barks from Erythrophloeum, Eucalyptus, etc. are boiled more or less to a pulp and held by hand on to the affected part.

Bolam (1924) tells how mud poultices were used for drawing pus away from festers. Such poultices were made with clear earth mixed with warm water to a fairly thick consistency and the mixture was placed to a thickness of about two inches directly upon the open portion of the sore. This was left on for a few days, then removed, the wound cleaned with water (if available) and then anointed with goanna fat.

Bleeding as a practice

Superficial incisions made with stone knives were often used as a means of relief on inflamed or painful knee or shoulder joints (North West Districts).

Gashing the top of the head from behind was commonly used to relieve fevers in the Cape Grafton District. Similar gashing used for the relief of headache was practised in the Tully River area, but here additional treatment was the placing of a bark over the cuts and a friend hammering on the bark with a stick.
In old Brisbane days, headache was treated with blows with a waddy without any bark or cut being made. Another cure was for the patient to go under water and force himself to remain there as long as possible. An even more extraordinary relief operation was practised by the Koko-mini on the Palmer. The sufferer stands at full length pressing both hands against a sapling that, below his hand's level, has been stripped of bark. A friend will hit the sapling on the barkless portion some hard blows with a heavy piece of pandanus tree.

Tully River natives relieve headache and nasal congestion by poking a sharp piece of blady grass up into a nostril until bleeding occurs. The same people treat rheumatic pains in the arms by making longitudinal incisions between two ligatures on the limb which is strongly flexed whilst being cut.

At Yarrabah (Dawson 1955) cuts were made at the place where the head ached and native string was tied tightly around the head. At the same place cutting the lobe of the ear until it bled was a cure for toothache.

Stimulants - Local Anaesthetics

Mrs. Duncan Kemp (1933, p.53) tells of the Pitcheri plant being used to deaden pain in the harsher initiation ceremonies and as a stimulant for use on long marches.

Corfield (1921, p.123) tells of the preparation of Piwiri thus: "It is prepared for use by the seeds being pounded up and mixed with giya ashes which is chewed until the proper consistency is achieved. It then resembles putty and when not being used as a chewing gum, is carried by the blacks around their ears".

It is of interest to note that a paper on "The Piwiri Poison" was read by Dr. Bancroft to the Queensland Philosophical Society on March 28, 1872. He states it was used as a stimulating narcotic and its use was confined to the old men of a tribe called Malutha. I quote "The old men, before any serious undertaking, chew these dried leaves, appearing to use about a tablespoonful". He notes that a few twigs are burnt and mixed with ashes and the resulting mess chewed and in between chews, is stored behind the ear. He states too that the mass is at last swallowed and "The native after this, is in a sufficiently courageous state of mind to fight, or undertake any serious business". Dr. Bancroft also quotes from the Wills Diary "From Cooper's Creek homewards" (p.283) when on May 7, 1861, they were given some food and some stuff called "bedgery" or "pedgery" - it has a highly intoxicating effect when chewed, even in small quantities.

One very interesting remark was made by T.L. Bancroft (1887) in relation to Nicotiana suaveolens Lehm, a native tobacco of Australia. It appears that the natives never discovered that this plant possessed the same narcotic action as does tobacco and Piwiri both of which they accept as a boon.
Dr. Winterbotham (1951, p.7) has recorded in the Yinniburra tribe that a collection of leaves of the stinging tree (Gympie Gympie) was held over a fire (apparently to burn off the very fine irritating hairs) then mixed into a paste with water - the paste was then spread over the shoulders where the tribal cuts were to be made during initiation. The effect was to deaden the pain.

So we come to the end of a part of the story - there are many more records available, I have chosen but a few, but enough to tell a story that shows a beginning of a training in medicine, of Junior and Senior practice, of some variety of drugs (sic) and the preparations made from them, and finally of some of the illnesses and accidents treated. It is an interesting story and there is food for thought in a comparison with our modern day ways and means of dealing with some of the very same problems.

Aegiceras majus Gaertn.
Alphitonia excelsa Reisseh
Aleophila australia
Andropogon bombycinus R. Br.
Barringtonia racemosa Caudich
Calamus caryotoides, Mart.
Calophyllum inophyllum, Linn
Canarium austrolasianum, F.v.M
Capparis uberiflora F.v.M
Cassytha glabella R. Br.
Cymbidium albaeiflorum F.v.M
Duboisia Hopwoodii F.v.M
Erythrophloeum Laboucherii F.v.M
Eucalyptus corymbosa Smith
Eucalyptus macrotheca F.v.M
Eucalyptus prunosa Schau
Eucalyptus resinifera Smith
Eucalyptus terminalis F.v.M
Eucalyptus tessellaris F.v.M

Red Ash
Common Fern Tree
Ground Palm
Alexandrian Laurel
"Do-onie" of Cloncurry
A Laurel Dodder
Black Box, Coolibah
Poison Tree or Ironwood
Bloodwood
Black Box, Coolibah
"Kullingal", of Cloncurry natives
Red stringybark
Bloodwood
Moreton Bay ash

oo0oo
Gutta-percha Tree
Rough or Purple fig
Beechwood
"Kiilin" of Cloncurry
A mistletoe
Broad leafed Tea-tree
Tea Tree
Australian Mint
Native tobacco
Sacred Balm
"te-mo" of Mappoon Natives
"Kar-kor" of Mitchell R. natives
Leighhardt Tree or Canary Wood
"Dardatra" of Pennifather R. natives

(N.B. The names given herewith are from Comprehensive Catalogue of Queensland Plants, F.M. Bailey, Government Printer, Queensland 1909)

ADDENDUM:

Daisy Bates (1938, p.217) in treating the sick, states she gave them no patent medicines and refers to some of their own type remedies and states "Their own methods were crude; a tightened head band allegedly alleviates headache, and a magic string would be expected to cure most other complaints.

To amputate a limb they made a small bright fire and placing the broken and probably gangreening wound on top, they burned off the leg or the arm, cauterizing the ragged bones still attaching to the upper limbs"


Dahl, Knut 1895 - Treatment After Circumcision in the Northern Territory. Trans. R.S. South Australia, XIX, pp.122-123.


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