



Historical Insights: 7

Doctor George Caryl's Medicines

GENERAL TREATMENTS

Plants always have been used in the treatment of disease. Experiences were passed verbally from one generation to another before they were codified. In the American colonies, domestic medicine was similar to learned medicine, as there were very few men licensed by London's Royal College of Physicians and even those doctors relied on herbal medicines. The most common training for a doctor involved serving, usually for three years, as an apprentice to a practicing physician. George Caryl (1767-1829), a son of the Reverend Benjamin and Sarah Caryl, graduated from Harvard College in 1788, subsequently studying for two years with Doctor Samuel Willard in Uxbridge. While in Uxbridge, George met Pamela Martyn (Martin) (1769-1855), and married her in 1790. They lived with his parents and had nine children, four of whom survived to adulthood. Doctor Caryl became Springfield Parish's first physician and, also, practiced in Medfield, Dedham,

Needham, and Sherborn, beginning in 1790. Prior to this time, Doctor Nathaniel Ames (1740-1822) of Dedham, a classmate of Benjamin Caryl, practiced in the area and his diaries have been published.

In George Caryl's day, medical knowledge was limited. Nothing was known about the role of bacteria or viruses in disease and knowledge of contagion was limited. Until the mid-nineteenth century, medical views relied on Aristotle's (384 BC - 322 BC) theory of the four elements: earth, fire, water, and air. Hippocrates (ca. 460 BC - ca. 370 BC) applied this concept to medicine with his four humors: earth - black bile; fire - yellow bile; water - phlegm; and, air - blood. Balance in the four humors produced health, while excess or deficit resulted in disease. Galen (ca. 129 AD - ca. 200 AD) wrote prolifically and advanced the humoral paradigm through experiments, which related the disease causing an imbalance to a specific organ, thus allowing for more precise treatments. The alchemist and doctor, Paracelsus (1493-1541), adopted the Doctrine of Signatures, which originated in China and stated that by looking at a plant, it would be possible to deduce its usefulness. Thus, maidenhair fern was good for the hair. Paracelsus, also, introduced chemicals such as lead, mercury, opium, and sulfur. These therapies, in addition to bleeding, caused violent results, which patients frequently expected, without regard to efficacy. Later, two valid therapies were discovered. In the seventeenth century, the bark of the cinchona tree offered some success in malaria treatment and formulation of quinine from the bark in 1819 led to more useful medical practice. In 1721 small pox vaccination began in Boston, having been practiced earlier in Africa.

DOCTOR GEORGE CARYL'S RECEIPTS

As part of his apprenticeship, George Caryl hand wrote his Receipts, a series of seventy-three recipes he could follow in concocting medicines for his patients. Doctor Caryl grew or

collected many of the materials he needed for his receipts. Some of those mentioned follow: beeswax, bilberries, butter, camphor, chamomile, coltsfoot, coriander, elder, fennel, feverfew, gentian, hog's lard, honey, lovage, juniper, lavender, maidenhair, marjoram, mint, mugwort, mutton suet, neat foot oil, pennyroyal, pyrethrum, rose, rosemary, rue, valerian, vinegar, and wintergreen. Ingredients easily procured in Boston include the following: allspice, aloe, balsam, barley, bitter almond, calamine, camphor, cloves, cream of tartar, cumin, ginger, lead, mercury, myrrh, olive oil, opium, rum, saffron, salt, sugar, sulfur, turpentine, and wine.

His seventh recipe, Common Bitters, reads "Rad gentian #1 Cumin #? Gallinal Z4 Flor Cham Z4 Bos Juniper #1 Pul & mix". (Note: Z stands for symbol for ounce.) Transcription suggests 1 pound of gentian root, ? pound of cumin, 4 ounces of galingale, 4 ounces of chamomile flowers, 1 pound of juniper berries. Pulverize and mix. In liquid form Bitters have been consumed as digestive tonics and were thought to correct liver disturbances, fevers, and poor circulation. Gentian gives Bitters their characteristic flavor and contains gentianne, which has anti-inflammatory qualities; cumin adds color; galingale eases colic; chamomile flowers possess anti-inflammatory and antihistemic qualities; and, juniper berries are diuretic and antiseptic.



Dr. Caryl's Walking Stick

The snake makes this walking stick resemble the rod of Asclepius, Greek god of medicine.

REFERENCES

This *Historical Insights* is based on Kendrick Jones' senior project at Milton Academy in 1996. Additional information is available at the Benjamin Caryl House. George Caryl's *Receipts* are at the Sawin Museum.

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