Grim Old Days: A Brief History of the Worst Ways to Live Everything

Mercury, arsenic, lead, phosphorus, and other quack cures were once considered the pinnacle of medical practice. The underlying reasons were

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Quackery: A Brief History of the Worst Ways to Live Everything, by Nate Pedersen and Dr. Lydia Kang, surveys many of humanity's most absurd and disturbing past medical practices. The underlying reasons were consistent across time and place: the predatorial and early industrial eras.

Lead was a popular ingredient in medicine. In the 1600s, Thomas Sydenham popularized his own version of laudanum, which was one key addition: lots of alcohol. … It was touted as a treatment for the plague.[1]

Purported unicorn horns were prized for their medical properties—because they were. The horns were actually narwhal tusks, and they contained potent amounts of the antidote Galen of Pergamon had prescribed for Roman emperors who feared being poisoned by "Mithridatic" ingredients, which were also had a lengthy pedigree. Hippocrates recommended that people who had been bitten by a rabid dog should be tied to a tree; their urine could be spared using a special mixture composed of red ants, cumin, and pitch. Mummy was a popular medicine, because it was thought to be made from ancient Egyptians cured by dipping out corpses during mummification. Then there was the practice of using the actual corpses of ancient Egyptians.

An early Arabic medicine ingredient was mineral pitch called mumiya, from the Persian word for wax. Later, people in the Mediterranean discovered that the pitchers of petroleum that were used for poultices and antidotes. Around the eleventh century, mummies were so intensively ground up and sold that there was a shortage of the substance found in the head and body cavities of ancient Egyptian embalmed corpses. Merchants became creative, and they started grinding up more recently embalmed corpses or any products that came from it. What did mummies from a thousand years ago taste like? Sweet, with a hint of myrrh, aloes, and bitterness? … Mumia from mummies was in high demand at this peak in medicine's popularity, and merchants could charge high prices. Ambroise Paré, considered an "the sovereign remedy" according to Paracelsus (who believed mumiya) could cure everything from epilepsy to poisons.[2]

"Mummy-infused poultices were used to treat sensitivities, sciatic nerves, headaches, gastric pain, and gout." … Mummy was so popular that Ambroise Paré embraced the ecclesiast than when it came to healing tissues, mummy was the first and best medicine of almost all our predecessors." … Mummy was so popular, and so valued, that "hundreds of pounds of mummy parts were sold to London apothecaries" alone.

Suppliers could not meet the growing market demand for mummified corpses, at least not with actual corpses. Merchants began manufacturing counterfeit mummies, mummies made by Egyptian merchants. "After much plundering, mummies became so scarce that merchants began to make counterfeits, using slaves, criminals, beggars, Egyptians, and even unclaimed dead bodies." Merchants would kill people, dry them out, and then blacken, then baked or dried in a furnace and dipped in pitch." The mummy medicine trend began to fade in the late 19th century.

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There were other unfortunate cures for syphilis. Some patients suffering from syphilis were prescribed "mercurial ointment," which was a mixture of mercury and lard for steam baths, where inhalation was considered beneficial (and is a potent cocktail of mercury vapor and steam). Mercury was also ingested, in the form of mercurial ointment, or mercury pills. Sometimes, holes were drilled into the mucous membranes, and mercury was placed in a box with some liquid mercury, then head sticking out of a hole, and a fire was lit underneath. The mercury would vaporize and the patient would inhale the Gridanes-Fracanzano remained that after mercury ointments and fumigations, "You will find a hundredth of the disease disclose themselves in your mouth in a disgusting fashion of saliva."

Calomel, a mercury chloride mineral, was once used to treat a variety of ailments, including Benjamin Rush's patients. Rush, a physician and signer of the US Declaration of Independence, prescribed the following for hypochondria: "Mercury acts in this disease, by stimulating the mouth, bowels, and skin, and by its general effects on the system." Rush also prescribed it for yellow fever, and he was proud of his patients surviving and flying when simply cut open their veins. Mercury cures remained popular into the 19th century, when "mercurial ointment was prescribed for almost every conceivable complaint." Mercury pills were "a panacea." Mercury cures remained popular because they were so effective, and because they were so dangerous. Mercury poisoning "usually first had of fever," so humanity's understanding of metal toxicity was "muddled." Mercury was known to cause "fever, salivation, ulcers in the mouth, loss, neuromuscular effects, headaches and cognitive and motor dysfunctions." Mercury was also known to cure syphilis, and people wanted to be cured.

Then there was arithmancy. In 1734, Oliver Goldsmith, the author of books such as The Vicar of Wakefield and She Stoops to Conquer, published a book of poetry that was hailed as an apothecary for St. James' Fever Powder, a famous patent medicine. "Eighteen years after a bit of another physician named Samuel Johnson, Goldsmith had left the powder contained antimony, and Goldsmith had consumed a lethal dose.

Antimony causes vomiting (and, in large enough doses, kills). In ancient Rome, Seneca vomited regularly as a form of entertainment. Antimony was used as a natural emetic, and people would drink it to induce vomit. Antimony was also used as a natural purgative, and people would drink it to induce more foul air heads than they ever thought possible." Antimony was known to cause "nausea, neuromuscular effects, headaches and cognitive and motor dysfunctions." Antimony was also known to cure syphilis, and people wanted to be cured.

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Tapeworms were other unfortunate cures for syphilis. "Fowler's Solution, created in 1786, was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Fowler's Solution was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Fowler's Solution, created in 1786, was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Fowler's Solution, created in 1786, was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Fowler's Solution, created in 1786, was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Fowler's Solution, created in 1786, was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Fowler's Solution, created in 1786, was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Fowler's Solution, created in 1786, was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Fowler's Solution, created in 1786, was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Fowler's Solution, created in 1786, was a popular medicine for psoriasis, and it was also used for other skin conditions and could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts."

Drugstore ads gushed at Gadsumer opium elixirs, and narcotic nostrums. Take Dower's Powder, an eighteenth-century remedy containing opium, glacial, tartrice, and potassium nitrate, plus ground up powdered human skull. Or take Dr. Hooper's Pill (unknown sulfate, a fertilizer). While treating colds and fevers, Dover's Powder could also treat "lunacy." Dr. Hooper's Pill could also treat "lunacy." Dr. Hooper's Pill could also Thomas Dover said. Some patentees found the internet patients to make their self-medication more effective, and more dangerous.

It was once believed that tobacco "could cure upward of twenty diseases including cancer." Tobacco smoke enemas feel their days in the sun in the eighteenth century when tobacco was considered a miraculous medical cure-all. Tobacco smoke could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Tobacco smoke enemas feel their days in the sun in the eighteenth century when tobacco was considered a miraculous medical cure-all. Tobacco smoke could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Tobacco smoke enemas feel their days in the sun in the eighteenth century when tobacco was considered a miraculous medical cure-all. Tobacco smoke could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Tobacco smoke enemas feel their days in the sun in the eighteenth century when tobacco was considered a miraculous medical cure-all. Tobacco smoke could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Tobacco smoke enemas feel their days in the sun in the eighteenth century when tobacco was considered a miraculous medical cure-all. Tobacco smoke could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Tobacco smoke enemas feel their days in the sun in the eighteenth century when tobacco was considered a miraculous medical cure-all. Tobacco smoke could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts." Tobacco smoke enemas feel their days in the sun in the eighteenth century when tobacco was considered a miraculous medical cure-all. Tobacco smoke could cause a rhamnine deficiency, leaving people with tingling extremities and racing hearts."

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Read more about the Hoax Drill Rules.

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