

## MEDICAL FOLK-LORE OF THE ABANTU IN THE LIJDENBURG DISTRICT, TRANSVAAL.

BY CORNELIS PIJPER.

In the great number of books that have been written on South African natives several data may be found concerning the way in which the witch-doctors treat their ailing fellow-men. Yet the following observations, made by me while I was practising in the Lijdenburg district, have, so far as I know, never been published before ; they are to be regarded as a contribution to the study of comparative medical folk-lore.

(a) Inflammation of the eyes is combated by making holes in the lobes of the ears ; I was given to understand that in this way the disease was given an opportunity to escape. It is interesting to note that this practice is met with in Europe too ; in Holland the people improve on it by wearing rings in the holes.\*

(b) Children who suffer from nocturnal incontinence of urine are made to eat a certain kind of mouse ("streepmuis"), roasted whole. (Zoology knows two kinds of "streepmuis" in the Transvaal: one with one stripe—*Dendromus mesomelas* ; the other with four stripes—*Arvicanthus pumilio*.) It is interesting to compare Plinius, Hist. Natur., xxx, 14 (47)—"Urina infantium cohibetur muribus elixis in cibo datis," and Béal, Passetemps d'un praticien d'Auvergne, Paris, 1900—"Les bonnes femmes vous diront avec conviction, qu'une friture de rats empêche les mioches de pisser au lit." I have tried to find out what, in the native mind, was the "ratio" of this treatment, but have not met with success.

(c) For affections of the chest the native doctors like to administer the dejections of the hippopotamus, boiled. This highly-valued material is procured by means of barter from the natives living near the Limpopo ; I am sorry that I have not been able to find out exactly what is given in exchange. The internal use of the dejections of animals (and even of man) was in former centuries, even as late as 1650 (see the description in the works of the Dutch poet Cats of that time), common all over Europe, while already Galenus is stated to have said : "Medicus ignorare non debet medendi

\* Van Andel, Volksgeneeskunst in Nederland, 1909, p. 186.



rationem per stercora." (I have been unable to find where he said it.) I hope that some other observer may be able to find out why the natives only use the dejections of the hippopotamus.

(d) Burns and scalds are treated by the external application of poultry-dung; the white pieces are the best. It is interesting to note that van Andel (cited above) has (p. 395) the following quotation from the Wyse Jaerbeschryver (1663): "Koedreck, met goet melck vermenght op een doeck gesmeert en daer (de brandwond) opgelegd, treckt de hitte geweldig uit" (cow-dung, well mixed with milk, applied [to the burns] on a piece of cloth draws the heat out as by magic). Even at the present day faeces of all kinds of animals, and even of human beings, are being extensively used in the treatment of all kinds of wounds by the people in Europe; and Cabanès and Barraud (*Remèdes de bonne femme*, Paris, 1907) prove by a quotation out of a *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (1812) that, in France at least, official medical science occasionally took refuge to it even then: "En quelques occasions on a cru appliquer avec succès quelques excréments comme la fiente humaine, celle de l'hirondelle, l'urine humaine, etc." For the present-day use of faeces in the medical folk-lore of the Boers in Transvaal I refer to my *De Volksgeneeskunst in Transvaal*, Leiden, 1919.

(e) Rubbing the gums with a bug is thought to facilitate the teething of children. Rubbing the gums with saliva or human milk is practised all over Europe\*; of what use the bug is supposed to be escapes me altogether.

(f) Round the ankles of newly-born infants suffering from convulsions small pieces of cloth are tied, filled with a resinous substance, very much like asafoetida. It is difficult to grasp in what way an effect is expected. V. Andel, *op. cit.*, p. 224, relates how in some parts of Holland a small pouch, filled with asafoetida, is worn on the chest to ward off attacks of asthma; it is worth while to note that both convulsions and asthma come on and leave off suddenly. V. Andel regards this pouch to be an "amulet"; but as he omits to say what an "amulet" is supposed to be, and as works of reference do not bring us any further here, it is perhaps better to resign ourselves to our ignorance, at least for the present. It is interesting to note that, even at the present day, an alcoholic extract of asafoetida is being extensively prescribed for patients suffering from hysteria, so often complicated by sudden convulsions; and while according to some its effect is only dependent on the "suggestive" action of its smell and taste, others, and amongst those no less an authority than Lauder Brunton, maintain that it has a powerful effect on muscles (comp. Pinkhof and van der Wielen, *Vademecum Pharmacotherapeuticum*, Amsterdam, 1917, p. 65).

(g) In babies suffering from skin-rashes the treatment is not intended to make the rash disappear, but first of all to make it come out; for a

\* V. Andel, *op. cit.*, p. 140.



similar belief in Germany I beg to refer to the article on skin diseases in Henoch, *Vorlesungen über Kinderkrankheiten*, Berlin, 1903.

(h) For skin disease washing with cow's urine is deemed to be the best treatment. We Europeans have to remember that this opinion was held in European, specially French, universities too not four centuries ago. I quote Dioscorides—"Sed vetus (urina) ulcera capitis manantia, furfures, psoras, fervidas eruptiones multo magis abstergit,"\* and Albertus Magnus—"On doit être assuré, qu'il n'y a point de remède plus souverain au monde : car sans dire qu'elle guérit la teigne, les ulcères suppurans des oreilles et les places invétérées, elle sert encore à plusieurs autres maux et on ne voudrait pas pour beaucoup ne savoir sa valeur."† Pope John XXI, who before he became Pope had been a professor of surgery, recommended the urine of infants as an eye-wash, "experience having evidently shown that this fluid, which is usually bland and unirritating, a solution of salts of a specific gravity such that it would not set up osmotic processes in the eye, was empirically of value (James J. Walsh, *Mediaeval Medicine*, London, 1920, p. 152).

(i) For joints that have become stiff and fixed in abnormal positions the patient is given a decoction of frogs' legs : the inherent mobility of the frog's joints will pass on to those of the patient. It is well to remember that in some country districts of Holland suppurating, stiff joints are covered with "frogs'-butter"—unsalted butter wherein frogs have been suffocated and allowed to decompose (van Andel, *op. cit.*, p. 414); in Zwaben this remedy is applied to frost-bites (J. Jühling, *Die Thiere in der deutschen Volksmedizin*, Mittweida, 1900, p. 40).

\* Pedanii Dioskoridis Anazarbei De Materia Medica Libri Sex. Parisiis, 1537, cap. lxxiii.

† Les admirables secrets d'Albert le Grand, p. 184.



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