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**Contributors**

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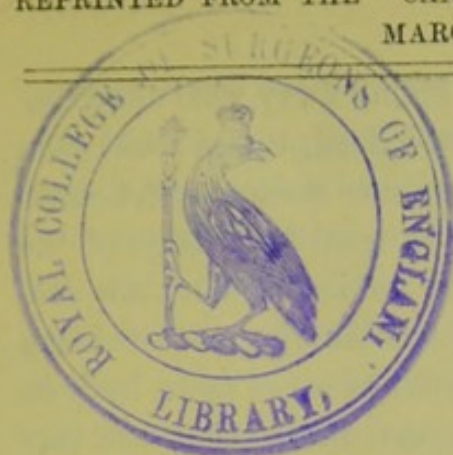
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## THE "MEDICINE-MAN";

OR INDIAN AND ESKIMO NOTIONS OF MEDICINE.

*A paper read before the Bathurst and Rideau Medical Association, Ottawa,  
20th January, 1886.*

BY ROBERT BELL, B.A.Sc, M.D., LL.D.,

Assistant Director of the Geological Survey of Canada.

Last year, having had the honor of reading before you a paper on "Diseases among the Indians," I would now beg to follow it with a short account of the notions of these people on the subject of medicine.

The science of medicine has now arrived at such perfection among civilized nations that we have almost forgotten the crude beginnings out of which our present knowledge has been gradually evolved. But from our pinnacle of learning, it is curious and interesting to observe the darkness amidst which some of our fellow-men are groping even yet. The false and mistaken notions as to the principles and practice of medicine which prevailed among our forefathers are recalled by some of those in vogue among the red-men; and while, in the light of our own superior knowledge, we may be disposed to laugh at their primitive ideas, we are reminded that many—perhaps the majority—of the doctrines once taught among our own people were absurd enough.

It is very difficult for a white man to learn precisely what the aborigines' views on medical subjects really are. Indians are by nature very reticent, and they appear to be afraid of ridicule;



or in some cases they are jealous of giving away what they consider valuable secrets. It is seldom, indeed, that a white man gains their confidence sufficiently to induce them to speak unreservedly on this subject. Even with a good knowledge of the Indian character, one requires to gain an insight into this subject by slow degrees—first, perhaps, by observing and studying their actions; and after having ascertained a few facts, by judicious and serious questioning, as opportunities arise, one may build on these and ask further questions until he learns the greater part of what is current among them.

Many people speak of “the Indians” as if all tribes were alike in every respect. But, in truth, there are great differences. Those with whom I am best acquainted personally, from about thirty years’ intercourse, are the various branches of the wide-spreading Cree or Outchipwai stock. I have also had some experience of the Eskimo, who differ widely from all the other aborigines of the continent, and who are not ranked as Indians at all.

Among the Outchipwais, the term “medicine” does not mean strictly material remedies or the practice of the healing art, but rather a general power or influence, of which that of drugs is only one variety. Hence a “medicine-man” is not simply a doctor of medicine, but a sort of priest, prophet, medium and soothsayer. He is also a juggler, conjurer, sorcerer or magician and general dealer in the supernatural. A mere knowledge of medicine proper is rather one of the lower or accessory branches of his profession, and it is often practiced by those who have no pretensions to be considered full-fledged medicine-men. Even women sometimes obtain great reputations as doctors. To the medicine-man a knowledge of drugs is valuable, principally to enable him to carry out different kinds of poisoning as may best serve his ends. His most important function and the secret of his power is his dealing in occult influences.

In former times, the great medicine-men among these Indians devoted their whole lives to the study and practice of their art, and even yet it receives the greater part of their attention. They were accustomed to do no common work, but lived at the



expense of the band they were amongst. They had great influence with the people, principally from preying upon the superstitious fears which had become inculcated by their own class from generation to generation for this express purpose. For the medicine-men form a secret society, with exclusive privileges, and they exercise a terrible influence in degrading their people. The seeming respect which is accorded to them is begotten of cowardly fear which has formed part of the education of the rank and file. They pretend to dispense good and bad luck, to control the weather, to be able to influence the movements of game and fish so as to bring plenty or starvation to the tribe, to predict events, to tell the fortunes of individuals, to bring about the sickness or death of men or dogs at a distance, and generally to have the confidence and coöperation of both good and bad spirits, with whom they communicate freely on certain set occasions.

The common people employ them in favor of themselves or their friends, or against their enemies, just as we do lawyers—for a consideration. It is here that the secret society business comes to their aid. Among the Outchipwai Indians there are many hypocrites who have not the manliness to fight their enemies fairly, or to openly resent an injury, or even to tell an adversary their opinion of him to his face. Such individuals will smile and profess great friendship, while harboring the bitterest enmity and even murderous designs. An Indian may be living at a considerable distance from the person he wishes to injure, and in order to gratify his revenge he will hire his medicine-man to carry out his purpose. But the latter will never appear on the scene. He will find means to operate secretly through another medicine-man who may not even be suspected. As threats are thus often actually followed by the dire results predicted, persons who may chance to fall sick, or to meet with any accident, become accustomed to attribute their misfortune to the machinations of an enemy or to the ill-will of some medicine-man; and in order to counteract it, they must employ another medicine-man to remove the cause. Thus the established belief in the powers of the medicine-man brings



much grist to his mill. The "opposing counsel" having received his fee, in the shape of some article of value to an Indian, will proceed with some grotesque ceremony and pretend to draw to himself and nullify the evil influence which has been troubling his client. He will affect to suck out the poison from the man's body or to go through agonies of pain, writhing and twisting himself amidst many groans, as if he were receiving, all at once, the essence of the disease of his patient. Or he may make-believe that he has been suddenly struck internally by some sharp instrument. The shock and accompanying exclamation are followed by spitting blood (usually from having surreptitiously lanced his gums) and the coughing up of an arrow-point, or a small piece of sharp bone or stone, which the evil spirit of the other sorcerer had transferred to him. In a short time the patient is expected to say he feels better; otherwise it is a sort of slight on the "strength" of the conjurer's "medicine." Sometimes the medicine-man will pretend to receive these sudden internal shocks to show the potency of some other member of the profession at a distance and the danger resulting therefrom, and hence the necessity for his own "strong medicine" as an antidote. He will then spit up the mysterious missile along with some blood, and after a groan or two will subside with a sigh of relief.

One of the modes of conveying an evil influence to a distance is to make a drawing on a piece of birch bark, or even in the sand, to represent the figure of the person to be injured, and then to select the site of the organ, as the heart, lungs, or bowels, which is to be operated upon. This is then stabbed through with a sharp instrument, or touched with poison, and an appropriate charm is repeated at the same time.

The apparent uncertainties of human life and fortune, and death itself, are thus accounted for, all being controlled by the medicine-men. A person dies, not from natural causes, but because it is the pleasure of some one of this all-powerful class that he should die, and because he has been unable to find another one capable of counteracting his "medicine."

In order to communicate with the spirits, the medicine-man



must have a special kind of wigwam or retreat erected. This is done by planting a number of nicely trimmed poles in the ground in the form of a circle about five or six feet in diameter. They are fixed in the erect position by being firmly bound together by hoops at intervals, with a crowning one at the top. The poles are lashed to the hoops with spruce roots or other fastenings. This frame is securely enclosed with bark all the way up, so that no one can peep in, even if disposed to do so, which, however, is never attempted. The medicine-man then gets inside and fastens up the opening. He mutters and sings at intervals, and then maintains a perfect silence. Suddenly the medicine wigwam is violently shaken, after which it is announced that the spirits have arrived and he is ready to answer questions. I have been present on some of these occasions. A question must generally be accompanied by a fee, such as a plug of tobacco or a box of matches. The answers are given in a deep sepulchral voice, and are sometimes direct and positive, but oftener ambiguous, and, in the latter case, great ingenuity is sometimes shown in constructing an answer which will be verified, whichever way events may happen. Or instead of giving any answer, the attention of the audience (which is squatted around the wigwam) may be diverted from the main point of the interrogation by some poetic or entertaining "yarn." When fairly cornered the medicine-man will say the spirit refuses to answer, is offended or has just left for the day, his presence being suddenly required elsewhere. Of course, with experience and intelligence in his favor, the chances are more than even that his predictions will be fulfilled, and great stress is laid on every hit, while the failures are easily forgotten. In this way, even superstitious white servants of the Hudson's Bay Company and others come to have a certain faith in these conjurers. The practices of the Indian medicine-man are evidently closely allied to the old-world witchcraft.

It may be asked whether these men are themselves sincere or believe in their own practices. In some cases and to some extent I think they do, but in others they are clearly guilty of



fraud and trickery. I have known instances where, having become Christians, they have confessed that their former course had been all imposture. Some of them have, however, been known to become really possessed with terrible hallucinations.

In regard to the practice of medicine proper, the common Indian notion of disease is that it is caused by some evil influence, which must be removed, either by driving off its spirit with the tom-tom and singing, or by a charm, and by sucking or blowing upon the part affected. The idea of drawing or sucking out the evil is the prevailing one in their theory of the practice of medicine. A medical practitioner is thus associated with the nature of a leech. This is well illustrated in the custom of naming children. Names are given to Indian children by the grandfather or recognized patriarch of the family-circle or band. The subject of the first striking dream which he has after the child's birth determines its name. If he dreams of a creature which lives by drawing out his food as a woodpecker, which draws grubs out of trees, or of a leech, but particularly of the mosquito, that most determined and energetic blood-sucker, it is considered a good omen, and that the child, whether male or female, is to be regarded as called to the medical profession. If a male, as soon as he is grown up, he is put in training to ascertain if the Great Spirit really intends him to be a medicine-man. The first point in the student's education is to try his powers of endurance and to see if the spirits will reveal themselves to him. For this purpose he is submitted to tortures, as by cutting and running wooden skewers through his muscles and by starvation. The latter is carried out by his retiring to some unfrequented place close to good water, so that he may be tantalized. He selects a site on the brink of a river or on the end of a point in a lake, and there builds himself a sort of couch or nest in a tree, or a platform of poles between three or four trees standing close together, and stays upon it day after day without food or drink until he become delirious, if he can stand it so long. At night he prays earnestly to the Great Spirit to reveal to him some new thing, and to give to him mysterious or supernatural power. Before he has had time to perish from hunger and



thirst, his friends go to relieve him and to ascertain the result of his vigils. It is said there are many failures at the start. If, however, the candidate be deemed a suitable subject, he becomes articulated to an old practitioner and duly initiated. Only one student is taken at a time. For some reason, perhaps want of superior intelligence and the necessary disposition, probationers, after having passed the first ordeal, are often rejected before they have learned much in regard to the mysteries of the profession.

Their *materia medica* is divided into two branches, good medicines and bad. Among the Crees, if not among other Indians, twenty classes of drugs are recognized. The first nine are all good or beneficial medicines, and the rest are all more or less bad or injurious. The student is first made familiar with the good medicines and then the bad, the worst of all being taught last. Some of their poisons, they pretend, are very dangerous to handle.

The great majority of their medicines are vegetable, but some are derived from animals, as the beaver, the musk-rat, the skunk, the deer, toads, snakes, insects, etc., while others are mineral, as iron pyrites, gypsum, salt, ochres, clays, ashes, etc. Parts of rare animals, impossible to obtain at the time, may be prescribed as the only means of saving a patient, who appears sure to die in any case. One of the most curious preparations in use amongst them is the "black poison," the effects of which are well known around the lakes of the Winnipeg basin and in the Swan River district. Some time after administration, it changes the color of an Indian's skin from brownish-yellow or copper-color to a sooty black, at the same time causing hair to grow on unusual parts, especially in an Indian, as on the cheek bones, etc. Its first effects are sickness, headache, and pains in the back and limbs. Afterwards, ulcerative sores break out in various parts of the body, chiefly over the joints, more particularly the knuckles. I have tried in vain to ascertain the composition of the "black poison," or to obtain a specimen of it. I have been told by a person who professed to have seen it, that it is a brown snuff-like powder, with a slight and rather sicken-



ing smell. A small quantity administered in food appears to be sufficient to produce the above effects. One victim, Peter Brass of Fort Pelly, informed me that it was given to him, unperceived, mixed with a dish of berries. I have heard it stated that it manifests its properties if smoked with tobacco, but this seems doubtful. It is said to be derived partly from a plant which does not grow north or east of Lake Winnipeg, possibly the poison ivy, *Rhus toxicodendron*. It is also said to contain the dried acrid matter from glands in the skin of the toad.

Although the medicine-man may have a considerable knowledge of the properties of many medicinal agencies within his reach, he depends, for the removal of disease, more on sorcery, beating the tom-tom, singing, etc., than on the efficiency of drugs. I have seen a miserable sick Indian, fresh from the hands of the medicine-man, with his poor body all painted with figures of tortoises, fishes and other creatures, in order to cure him of some internal trouble. A great medicine-man will not condescend to diagnose a case by the tedious process of examining the patient and asking questions. He is supposed to know all about it without going into these details. An English doctor told me that once when he was examining a sick Indian, to his surprise, neither the man himself nor his friends took much interest in the process. After answering a few questions in a sullen manner, they exclaimed, "We thought you were a doctor."

When an Indian becomes really sick he yields to his weakness, gives himself up to die, and is the most abject of creatures. The drumming on the tom-tom seems to rouse him a little, and to keep up his courage. An Indian canoeman once fell sick on my hands, and obliged me to stop my journey and stay in camp for two or three days in order to nurse him. He secretly sent word by some friend to bring a reputed medicine-man who was then camped at a considerable distance away. I was treating him as well as circumstances would permit with the aid of a small assortment of medicines which I had along with me. He was about well, and able to resume work the following day, when the medicine-man arrived late in the evening, after I had turned into my blankets. He and the friends who had come with him



made the night hideous with their tom-toms and the monotonous "hi-ya, hai-ya; hai-ya, hi-ya"! But as they had great faith in it, I did not interfere. Going over to my patient at daylight, I enquired how he had stood it. He replied that he was now quite well, that the medicine-man (who, by the way, was sleeping triumphantly close by) had driven off the spirit of his sickness, that it was now far away, and he was ready for work again. He did not recognize that he had to thank either myself or nature for the cure.

The Indian doctors do not understand the nature of delirium. When a patient becomes delirious, as in fevers, etc., they say he is about to "turn windigo"—that is, to become possessed of an irresistible desire for cannibalism. It was then the doctor's duty to knock the patient on the head. Many a life has been sacrificed in this way.

Midwifery is completely ignored by the great medicine-man, as beneath his dignity, and it is left entirely to the female doctors. A profound knowledge of obstetrics is seldom called for, as parturition is generally extremely easy, owing, principally, to the comparatively small size of the infant's head. Delivery is effected by placing the patient on her hands and knees on the ground, and supporting the abdomen by the hands of the accoucheuse.

In surgery, the medicine-men confine themselves to setting bones, dressing wounds and ulcers, and alleviating pain by any means in their power. They never attempt any grave operation, although their general knowledge of anatomy is not to be despised. They resort to cupping by means of sucking-tubes. They sometimes bleed by opening a vein in the arm with a sharp chip of flint. I have some evidence, in the shape of relics discovered in mounds, which leads me to think that certain of the ancient Indians had a better knowledge of surgery than those of the present day.

The sweat-bath is in universal use. In preparing for a race, or any other great muscular effort, they sometimes anoint the body and have the muscles kneaded by a friend after taking one of these baths.



The wild Eskimo appear to suffer from fewer diseases than Indians or whites. Among those of Hudson's Straits, notions of medicine are, as far as can be learned or observed, more crude and primitive than among the Indians. They also have a class of medicine-men whose pretensions to perform all kinds of miracles are of the most extravagant character. They appear to deal almost entirely in the supernatural, and to make little use of medicines. They have no hesitation in declaring to their own people that they can cure all kinds of disease and prolong life indefinitely, if they only choose to do so. They account for their own death by saying they wish to die, or that they are overcome by a still greater, but unseen, medicine-man. They say they can and do make themselves larger or smaller at will, or change themselves into some other animal, or enter into a piece of wood or stone; that they can walk on the water or fly in the air; but there is one indispensable condition,—no one must see them. They find themselves powerless to perform these miracles if anyone is looking on. I was once called to prescribe for a noted medicine-man on the Eastmain coast of Hudson's Bay, who had accidentally shot himself through the abdomen, and was suffering from peritonitis. All his pretensions had vanished, and he was most anxious to live. When one of these doctors visits a patient, after ascertaining the seat of the disease, he will rub and blow on the part and then withdraw his hand slowly and as if with difficulty, in order to show that he is hauling out a heavy weight of pain; at the same time he looks upward, rolls his eyes, and groans. Having pulled the disease out of his patient's body, he throws it away with a great effort, muttering some imprecation, after which he breathes more freely and looks for his fee, immediate payment being required by their rules of etiquette. Some of the Eskimo women profess to be doctors. They have a few minor surgical appliances, and they alleviate the pains of rheumatism, scurvy, sprains, etc., by rubbing or manipulating the parts affected. But their chief mode of cure is by stroking the body with an air of mystery while repeating charms. The doctor is generally accompanied by other women, who join in the choruses of the charms.



The following are some of the plants used medicinally by the Outchipwai Indians :—

*Acorus calamus*, sweet flag or “ fire-root,” as infusion or in powder, or it may be chewed whole, for colds and flatulence.

*Nuphar advena*, yellow pond-lily, as a tonic and for poultices.

*Abies alba* and *A. nigra*, spruce. The fresh inner bark is beaten to a fine homogeneous pulp to form astringent poultices for healing obstinate sores. Dr. Mathews of York Factory states that a decoction of the leaves or spray is used internally for scurvy and externally for rheumatism.

*Abies balsamea*, the balsam tree. The clear liquid “ gum ” from the blisters is applied freely to fresh wounds, and a decoction made from the bark is taken in large doses for diseases of the chest.

*Salix* and *Populus*. Decoctions of the bark of both willows and poplars are taken as bitter tonics and in fevers. Dr. Mathews informs me that the Indians of York Factory find a powerful astringent in one of the dwarf or creeping willows ; also, that they drink an infusion of the bark of the grey willow, a small tree of that region, for rheumatism.

*Lonicera ciliata*, honeysuckle, and *Ribes rubrum*, wild red currant. The stems and twigs of these two shrubs are tied into bundles and boiled together in a comparatively small quantity of water ; the strong decoction is taken in large doses for diseases of the bladder.

*Juniperus communis*, juniper. The Indians, generally, know the diuretic properties of the berries. In some parts of the country the stems are boiled and the inner bark beaten to a pulp to form poultices for foul sores.

*Ledum latifolium*, Labrador tea. A decoction of leaves and flowers is used for diarrhoea. A weak infusion is sometimes taken as a poor substitute for tea. The chewed leaves are applied to wounds and skin affections. Dr. Haydon, who resided six years at Moose Factory, says a decoction of the leaves or flowers is used in which to boil clean rotten wood of the white birch, which is afterwards dried, pounded and sifted. The



powder is used as a remedy for chafing and to dust new-born infants. He considers it a useful application.

*Cornus circinata*, *C. sericea* and *C. stolonifera*. An infusion of the bark of any of these dogwoods is taken in moderate doses for diarrhœa. A decoction of any of them in large doses is reported to be emetic. In small doses, the decoction is taken for fevers, colds and coughs. The bark dried quickly at the fire is used to smoke, either alone or mixed with tobacco.

*Iris versicolor*, blue-flag. The dried root in powder is used as a cathartic.

*Prunus Pennsylvanica*, pigeon cherry. A decoction of the bark is employed as an invigorating tonic in debilitated states of the system.

*Pyrus Americana*, mountain ash. A decoction of the young shoots is used as a tonic, and also, according to Dr. Haydon, for pleurisy, or what appears to be this disease from the symptoms they describe.

*Mentha Canadensis*, wild mint. The infusion as a carminative.

*Prunella vulgaris*, self-heal. Said by Dr. Haydon to be chewed for sore throat.

*Polygala senega*, snake root. The word senega is one of the varieties of the Outchipwai name for this plant, and means yellow-root. It grows principally in very calcareous soils, and is not found beyond latitude 52° in the region north of the great lakes. It is highly prized by the Indians, and is used by them in inflammation of the lungs, colds, coughs and sore throats.

A knowledge of the medicinal properties of the plants of the region I have referred to might often prove valuable. In distant travels in this northern wilderness the stock of medicines which one can take with him is necessarily very limited, or one may chance to have none at all. In case of emergency, it is therefore desirable to know the virtues of the native plants, always at hand, in order that one may make the most of them in the absence of more powerful remedies.

The Eskimo, who live entirely on raw animal food, appear to

regard any edible vegetable substance as medicine. They eat with great relish the northern blueberries and cranberries, and where they cannot get these, they take the leaves of the dwarf willows, a plant of the parsley family, called "scurvy-grass" (*Ligusticum*), and almost any kind of sea-weed. On the shores of Hudson's Straits they collect and eat the starchy roots of *Polygonum viviparum*, which grows there in considerable abundance. It is a singular circumstance that, notwithstanding the sameness of their food, and the fact that they never wash either their bodies or their clothing, the Eskimo appear never to be afflicted with scurvy, whereas white men, under a similar regimen, would be almost certain to be attacked.



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