

Most of us are familiar with traditional folk remedies: suffering from a cold? eat lots of chicken soup; upset stomach? drink some camomile tea; nasty toothache? apply some clove oil. The ancients also believed that numerous natural substances, in various forms, could cure all sorts of ailments, and a veritable handbook on such remedies can be found in the Natural History written by Pliny the Elder, the Roman scientist whose curiosity about the erupting Mount Vesuvius led to his untimely death in 79 A.D.

Books 30-32 of the Natural History record some remedies that we today might find peculiar, to say the least. For example, Pliny's remedy for a cold may not appeal to many of us: "I find that a heavy cold clears up if the sufferer kisses a mule's muzzle"; if your cold includes a sore throat, Pliny writes that "gargling with ewe's milk is a help to tonsils and throat, as is a multipede beaten up, and gargling with pigeon's dung and raisin wine". Personally, I still prefer gargling with warm salt water!

What could a Roman do about a toothache? According to Pliny, she could find some relief with "the ash of the burnt heads of dogs that have died of madness, which must be dropped in cypress oil through the ear on the side where the pain is" or, alternatively, "with the left eye-tooth of a dog, the aching tooth being scraped round with it". In the case of sore gums, a Roman might turn to "empty nail shells, reduced to ash, and myrrh added", or "the ash of a serpent burnt with salt in an earthen pot, poured with rose oil into the opposite ear".

None of us like to suffer from bad breath, so, writes Pliny, "the taste in the mouth is made agreeable if the teeth are rubbed with the ash of burnt mice mixed with honey"; bad breath itself would be induced "if the teeth are picked with a vulture's feather". Chapped lips? easily healed "by goose grease or by the white webs of spiders"!

Romans were obviously plagued with ailments that still try our patience. For problems of the complexion, Pliny tells us that pimples are "cured by poultry fat kneaded with onion. Very useful ointment for the face is honey in which bees have died, but the best thing

for clearing the complexion and removing wrinkles is swan's fat". Guess we really don't need to spend our cash on "Retinyl A" after all.

Feet are always causing problems, so Pliny suggests that "chafings caused by foot-wear are healed by the ash of an old shoe, by the lung of a lamb and of a ram"; moreover, "to prevent varicose veins, the legs of children are rubbed with lizard's blood, but both patient and rubber must be fasting".

Pliny writes a great deal about internal ailments as well. For example, "when any vital organ is in pain, the application of a sucking puppy pressed close to that part is said to transfer the malady to it" - please don't tell this to your local Humane Society! Lung problems, however, are better cured by mice: "they are skinned, boiled down in oil and salt, and taken in food". For bowel problems one might try "the roasted liver of cocks mixed with poppy juice".

Pliny's prescription for jaundice would probably not impress modern doctors: jaundice "is remedied by dirt from the ears ... there is also a bird called Jaundice from its colour; if a person with jaundice looks at it, he is cured and the bird dies".

Boils are never pleasant, so Pliny suggests one take "a shrew mouse, killed and hung up so that it does not touch earth after death, and pass it three times round the boil, with both the attendant and the patient spitting the same number of times". Got a bleeding wound? Try the "application of the ashes of horse-dung burnt with egg shells"; broken bones? Take "a dog's brain, spread on linen cloth, over which is placed wool, occasionally moistened underneath with oil; in about 14 days it unites the broken parts".

Need to stay up all night to get an essay written? Well, Pliny writes that "sleep is kept away by a dried bat's head worn as an amulet" - this, I suppose, will also keep other people away from you while you're at work. If, however, you end up with bloodshot eyes, don't despair: "salt with an equal weight of myrrh and honey" will do the trick.

A final example of Pliny's remedies deals with the plague of baldness: Romans apparently believed that hair could be restored "by the ashes of the sea-horse, either mixed with soda and pig's lard, or else by itself in vinegar; the skin, however, must be prepared for medications by the rind of the cuttle-fish ground to powder". Julius Caesar, however, appears not to have tried this, preferring to comb his remaining hair forward over his large bald spot.

While these remedies may seem comic to us, many Romans believed they worked. And perhaps they did: as W.H.S. Jones has commented, "the main conclusion to be drawn [from Pliny's list of remedies] is that popular cures, except in a few cases, were faith cures. Faith is a powerful healer today; in ancient times ... it was probably a far more effective healer". Indeed, scientists today are openly acknowledging the power of the human brain to heal the body, even of such killer diseases as cancer. That we have the ability to will our own recoveries from many illnesses is no longer a theme unique to science fiction. Thankfully, however, we can dispense with burnt animals, dried dung, and lizard's blood!