

THE ANCIENT ART OF CUPPING

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"Sir Arthur Keith describes, in his autobiography, how when he was a medical student he went with a general practitioner to see a farmer suffering from a violent attack of lumbago. After examining him, the doctor called for a bottle of whiskey, three tumblers and a wine-glass. He took a spill of paper, dipped it in the wine-glass of whiskey, lit it, thrust it for a few moments into one of the tumblers, and finally pressed the tumbler mouth downwards on the farmer's back. The skin at once welled into the glass, drawing with it so much subcutaneous blood that the welled-up mass became almost black. He repeated the operation with the second and then with the third tumbler, until all three were firmly fixed. At once the man was able to sit up freely, overjoyed to find his pain had completely disappeared. As Keith remarked:

This operation of dry cupping which I had just seen applied with success was one which was condemned by my teacher of surgery, who regarded it as a practice utterly devoid of any scientific foundation. Whatever the foundation might be it gave relief when applied to my friend Charlie Greig.

That was in 1888. The operation of cupping was performed by applying to the skin a glass or other form of cup after the air within it had been removed by heat or suction. In the dry method, the cup was applied to the unbroken skin, causing local subcutaneous trauma and acting as a counter-irritant. In the wet method the skin was scarified immediately before the cup was applied, and was a recognised method of blood-letting, but even in this form cupping acted in some measure as a counter-irritant. Both methods probably had considerable psychological value as well.

We have no idea when cupping first began. It is mentioned in the writing of Hippocrates and was practised by the Greeks in the fourth century B.C. It was probably known and used by other nations as well. The earliest instrument used was a gourd, and from this fruit was derived the Latin name for cupping, 'cucurbitula'.

In the primitive regions of the world cupping has been practised for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and it can still be seen in these parts in its earliest form. The American Indians use the upper end of a buffalo horn about two and a half inches in length with a hole at the tip, through which a vacuum can be produced by suction and which can afterwards be plugged. The medicine men, with their powerful facial muscles and with considerable exertion and agility, can make a very successful job of cupping, and they use the method for extracting the poison from snake bites and for relieving pain and cramp in the abdomen.

Hippocrates seems to have used both dry and wet cupping; in the main to treat menstrual disorders. He ordered large cupping glasses to be applied to the breasts of women suffering from menorrhagia. He also prescribed for the same condition and for a yellow

vaginal discharge, long-continued cupping to different parts of the thighs, in the groin and below the breasts.

Celsus, who wrote on the subject at some length in the first century A.D., thought that the subcutaneous oedema produced by dry cupping consisted partly of flatus derived from the breath. Celsus advised cupping for both acute and chronic maladies, including attacks of fever, and he particularly stressed that if there was danger in blood-letting, recourse should be had to cupping. He advised dry and wet cupping for oedema, dry cups in several places to treat paralysis, cups to the temple and occiput in cases of long-standing pain in the head, wet cupping for pain in the neck, dry cups applied under the chin for faucial angina, cups to the chest for cough, dry cups for pain in the chest if the patient was not strong enough for blood-letting, dry cups - dry in particular - to treat flatulence, dry cups applied to the abdomen in two or three places to treat indigestion and abdominal pain, and scarification with cups to the groins and even to the breasts in cases of excessive menstruation. He also advised local cupping for abscesses, and as a means of extracting poisons from bites made by man, apes, dogs, wild animals or snakes.

Aretaeus in the early second century used both wet and dry cupping, but preferred the former. He used dry cupping extensively to treat prolapse of the uterus. His idea was to attract the uterus, and for this purpose he cupped the loins, ischial regions, groins, spine and even between the scapulae. For cholera he cupped the back and the body, shifting his instruments rapidly. He cupped for ileus, epilepsy and over the kidneys in cases of renal calculus.

Galen was a great advocate of the method. He described cups of glass, horn and brass, the latter being the most commonly employed, though he commended glass cups, for they enabled the physician to see the amount of blood discharged.....Plethora was a contra-indication. He used cupping to abstract what he called 'matter':

to allay pain, diminish inflammation, disperse swellings, induce appetite, restore energy to a weakened stomach, cut short delirium, transfer morbid afflux from parts deep seated, restrain haemorrhage and benefit menstruation.

Application was not always made over the affected area:

In promoting revulsion from the chest or belly the application is to be made to the hands; and to the lower parts when a revulsion is to be made to arrest vomiting.

He added to the indications for cupping, lethargy, frenzy and eye diseases. For the latter he advised the application of cups to the back of the neck after scarification, and it was regarded as important that a good deal of blood should be removed.....

Avicenna preferred wet cupping, reserving dry cupping for cold swellings, and whenever cups were to be moved about in various places. He refused to cup infants during the first year of life, and preferred not to cup until they were in their third year. Cupping was contra-indicated after the sixtieth year of life. Cups were best applied in the middle of the month, when the humours were in a state of agitation and during the time when the moonlight was increasing; when the humours were increasing also. Magic and astrology were most important factors in the treatment.

Avicenna advised cupping as follows: to the nape of the neck in heaviness of the eyelids, itch of the eyes, foetor of the mouth, tremor of the head and lesions of the teeth, ears, nose, throat and face;....under the chin for toothache, sore throat, loss of countenance and to cleanse the head and jaws;....between the shoulder-blades for pains in the upper arms and throat and to relax the cardiac orifice of the stomach;....over the loins for scabies, pustules, gout, piles, bladder, kidney and uterine lesions and for inflammatory masses in the upper part of the thigh;....to the front of the thigh for orchitis, hernia and leg ulcers;....to the popliteal space for abscess or septic ulcer of the leg or foot;....over the malleoli for retained menses, sciatica and gout and over the buttocks near the anus to draw humours from the whole body and head, to benefit the intestines, cure decomposition of the menses and thereby alleviate the whole body.

Maitre Henri de Mondeville, surgeon to King Phillippe of France, wrote a textbook on surgery somewhere between 1306 and 1320. He included a long and important section on cupping, detailing the points we have already mentioned....Among the indications he listed for cupping with scarification were these:

Near the navel to bring back a displaced uterus; over the navel itself to reduce a hernia or stop excessive menstruation in girls; over the liver if the right nostril is bleeding; over the spleen if the left nostril is bleeding; on both liver and spleen if both nostrils bleed; on the path of a renal stone coming down to the bladder - a little below the pain so as to draw the stone downwards.

Cupping was widely used by most of the best physicians. Boerhaave dry cupped for pneumonia. Richard Mead treated apoplexy by cupping the nape and sides of the neck with pretty deep scarifications. He cupped with deep scarifications under the occiput to treat eye disease and with slight scarifications round the navel for the iliac passion, a diagnosis which probably embraced several acute abdominal conditions, including appendicitis. John Huxham strongly advised wet cupping in any feverish condition. He wrote in 1788:

Drawing off blood by cupping on the shoulders may be done with safety and frequently gives good relief in pneumonia and diseases of the breast as well as of the head, though the reason may not be so very obvious or assignable - also for asthma.

Cupping persisted right through the nineteenth century, but was still apt to be designated to bath attendants and specially trained cuppers. Dr. Marshall Hall, of St. Thomas's Hospital, described a refinement of wet cupping in 1845:

I have found it useful to apply the cupping instruments twice, so as to make incisions crossed at right angles, applying the cupping glasses slightly so as to take very little blood. The object is to induce effectual counter irritation.

With regard to dry cupping, Dr. Hall found it had greater efficiency than he formerly imagined. He thought it might:

act in the nervous cases on the imagination, but the effect is as real as if the agency were of the most physical kind.

At last a little sense was creeping into the minds of those using this archaic method of treatment, and with the advent of sense its days were numbered.