

Cupping in the Western World

Cupping dates back thousands of years for the treatment of pain and disease. The first to embrace cupping for therapeutic use were the ancient Egyptians. The oldest recorded medical textbook, Ebers Papyrus, written in approximately 1550 BC in Egypt. Bleeding by cupping was used to "remove the foreign matter from the body," according to the ancient text. Galen (c. 129-200 AD) and Hippocrates, celebrated physicians, both advocated the therapy of cupping. Medicinal practices, in those days, consisted of bleeding purposes. Around this time, physiology and ideas of organ function remained rudimentary. To cope with disease, methods to starve the source of the sickness from the body, or bleed to drain it away, developed. Erasistrasus, an acclaimed physician who practised in Alexandria, Egypt, was condemned by Galen for not using cupping.

Instead, Erasistrasus used fasting on most of his patients. A notable account of the practice of medicine among the Egyptian during that period has been given by Prosper Alpinus, who worked as a physician to the Venetian Consulate in Egypt at the close of the 16th century: "And as it is well-known that although the nations of the East have frequently changed masters, they are by no means prone to change manners and customs." Cupping appears to have been a prominent remedy for almost every type of disease, as well as an important means of preserving health among the Egyptians and other nations inhabiting that country.

Alpinus, in the following excerpt on the Egyptian use of scarifying and cupping, quotes the authority of Herodotus of Greece (413 BC), who is the first writer of secular history and a renowned physician: "Scarification, with Cupping, possesses the power of evacuating offending matter from the head' of diminishing Pain of the same part, of lessening inflammation; of restoring appetite; of strengthening a weak stomach; of removing vertigo; and tendency of faint; of drawing deep-seated offending matter towards the surface; of drying up fluxions; checking haemorrhages; promoting menstrual evacuations; arresting the tendency to putrefaction in fevers; allaying rigors; accelerating and moderating the crisis of diseases; removing a propensity to somnolence; conciliating natural repose; removing heaviness. These, and many analogous maladies, are relieved by the judicious application of the Cucurbits(Cups) dry or bloody."

The similarities of the cause of disease and the theory of Traditional Chinese Medicine(TCM) - disease occurs as a result of imbalance between the Yin and the Yang - are acknowledged by Galen. According to Peter Brain's book, Galen on blood letting, he indicates that Galen defines disease and health in terms of nature. "Disease is an unnatural state of the body", expounds Galen, "which impairs a function. Health is a state in accordance with nature, and the cause of the functions."

Galen goes on to say:"The nature does its best to restore unnatural states to their healthy condition. The function of the Physicians to cooperate with her. When a patient is suffering from a disease, nature is struggling to overcome the Pathogenic agents and if she is plainly succeeding the Physician should do nothing. If however she is getting the worst of the struggle, he must come to her aid by doing what she would do if she could. The Physician must preserve what is according to nature, eliminating what is not". This view of harmony with nature, Galen believes, was also Hippocrates' opinion.

In Galenian physiology, there are three main types of fevers and his treatment of them are in accordance with nature. The short-lived, ephemeral (short-lived) kind is the result of temporary overheating of the body. As the cause is no longer present, the doctor's only task is to cool the patient. On the other hand, the inflammatory fevers prove to be more difficult. In these cases, it may be necessary to dissipate the inflammatory focus, and bloodletting is one of the possible measures. However, if the inflammation has hardened in a particular area, the doctor's problems will have increased. During such a case, local cooling remedies can be used. Hence, emphasis must be placed on the ancient system of keeping the body free from initial residues. Constipation, or the suppression of menstrual flow, were regarded as very serious matters because material that ought to be eliminated was being retained by the body. In addition, much attention was given to prophylactics, which were protective devices to prevent diseases. These ideas are common in popular belief even today.

"The principal indication for Blood letting, then, is to eliminate such residues, or to divert blood from one part to another by the process known as Revulsion or Derivation," Galen resumes. Galen, repeated emphasized the advantages of bloodletting over other forms of haemorrhage. For instance, a doctor can stop the blood flow

whenever he feels the need to. Moreover, all medical disease are due to dyscrasia (a faulty state of the constitution or a morbid condition of the blood due to some general disease) of one type or another, according to Galen's system of pathology. In TCM this is known as Stagnation of Blood and Qi. A doctor, during these circumstances, only needs to restore the balance of the humors in the body.

However, individual patients differ vastly in their healthy and diseased states, a doctor's task is made difficult. Those that are by nature Cold, are more liable to conditions such as dropsy than to fevers; others are Hot, and so on. A doctor must judge the natural balance, or temperament of the patient as it is of great practical importance.

Two forms of cupping have been distinguished, for thousands of years, by medical authors: Dry and Wet. In Dry cupping, a cup is drained of air and applied to the skin, causing the skin to tumefy (swell) and therefore no blood is actually removed from the body. However, In Wet cupping the process begins with dry cupping and is followed by several incisions being made in the skin, in order to collect blood. Either forms of cupping is considered an "art," the London copper Samuel Bayfield in 1823, who wrote that "the value of which every one can appreciate who has had opportunities of being made acquainted with its curative power by observing its effects on the person of others, or by realizing them in his own."

Surgeon Charles Kennedy in 1826 wrote:"The art of Cupping has been so well known, and the benefits arising from it so long experienced, that it is quite unnecessary to bring forward testimonials in favour of what has received not only the approbation of modern times, but also the sanction of the remotest antiquity". Among the Egyptians, who introduced bloodletting to Greece, cupping was the usual remedy for almost every disorder, and they no doubt had received it from the more ancient nations of the East, from whom they had derived their other knowledge.

Methods of topical withdrawal of blood alone is recommended in many cases, and this can only be effected by means of leeches or cupping. However, leaches have been proven to be less adequate in their application that other means have been prescribed to enhance their effect. The time that the leaches are on, and how long the blood continues to flow after their removal should be noted as part of the operation. As to cupping, three methods have been put forward to encourage blood flow to the skin surface when it is sluggish: friction, fomentation (therapeutic use of warmth and moisture) and warm baths.

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