

A Brief History of Cupping

By Bruce Bentley

Way back in time, long before any historical or archeological evidence had been uncovered to support the application of cupping instruments to the body as a therapeutic procedure, prehistoric humans relied in part on their ability to suck and draw to the surface any irritations such as stings and thorns. Early humans also developed conceptualisations concerning their place in nature and the universe and the causes of ill health.

In their efforts to explain sickness, they held beliefs about that which could enter the body or mind such as evil spirits and cause pain and suffering. Many researchers including anthropologists have described how healers of these supernaturalistic traditions of illness causation applied oral suction to the surface of the body to withdraw the effects of these malevolent influences.

THE HORN METHOD

In time, various natural resources began to be used to effect suction - which makes good sense because indigenous groups could exploit their natural resources. For example, natives along the west coast of North America, in the vicinity of Vancouver Island, used shells. In Europe, Asia, Africa and North America, hollow animal horns were fashioned to provide an effective cupping device. In North America, the natives made their cupping implements by slicing off the point of a buffalo horn. They would then place the base of the horn on the body and suck the air out through the opening at the tip. When a vacuum was achieved, a wad of dried grass would be immediately thrust into the opening by the nimble workings of the tongue. By this method the medicine men, with their powerful facial muscles and considerable agility, can make a very successful job of cupping. (Brockbank, 1987:22). Another technique used to withdraw disease was by sucking through a bone tube. During the Babylon - Assyrian Empire (stretching from Iraq to the Mediterranean) massage was practised as well as 'cupping by sucking, with the mouth or by using a buffalo horn' (Mettler, 1947:320). The source of this information was presumably found inscribed on clay tablets, written in one of the earliest written languages, ie. cuneiform script around 700BC.

EARLY RECORDS OF CUPPING

The earliest pictorial record I have been able to find on cupping is in a carved relief of medical instruments used by the Egyptians around 1500 BC. Cupping vessels of contemporary design can be recognised in the lower corner.

HIPPOCRATES AND THE EUROPEAN TRADITION OF CUPPING

Textual evidence on cupping can be found in the writings of Hippocrates (C.460-377 BC), known as the father of modern medicine. During this golden era of the early Greek state, Hippocrates and his followers were devoted to an empiric approach to healing and sought naturalistic explanations why people became ill. They thoroughly rejected causes like spirits or ghosts, and instead reasoned that poor diet, insufficient exercise, exposure to adverse weather,

an unbalanced lifestyle and emotional factors were the chief agents of ill health. In his guide to Clinical Treatment, Hippocrates recommended cupping for the treatment of angina, menstrual and other disorders.

Samuel Bayfield (1839: 51-52) wrote, "Hippocrates was a minute observer, and has left us some striking remarks on the shape and application of the cups. He recommends that they should be small in diameter, conical in shape, and light in their weight, even when the disease for which they are applied is deeply seated".

Hippocrates also wrote about two forms of cupping. These are known as dry cupping and wet or moist cupping. Dry cupping pulls the local underlying tissue up into a cupping vessel, whereas in wet cupping, the skin and sometimes deeper, is cut to produce a flow of blood and then a cup is applied. The strong drawing action of the cup increases the volume of blood taken. Although he did practise wet cupping, it seems likely that Hippocrates advocated dry cupping because it was a gentler and safer technique.

Cupping remained a constant in professional medical treatment throughout Europe. It was practised by such famous physicians as Galen (131-200AD), Paracelsus (1493-1541) and Ambroise Pare (1509-90). Cupping was also practised by other practitioners including barber-surgeons and bath house attendants.

WOMEN AND THEIR PRACTICE OF CUPPING

Throughout European history, most of the population were treated by local lay practitioners who could charge less and be consulted more readily than physicians. Even more convenient was the availability of cupping as a therapy within the household. An important role that women have occupied in traditional societies has been the one who is skilled in the knowledge and application of a broad range of treatments and remedies. 'Cross cultural studies show that women and, in particular, female heads of households represent a major source of therapeutic assistance in many societies.' (Fineman, 1989:25). I have been informed by reliable sources that in living memory, cupping in Greece, Holland, Russia and Turkey was usually performed by women. In Vietnam, the lay and semi-professional cuppers I met were all women. In 11th century Europe from the writings of the masters we do know that there were a great many women physicians who were held in high esteem and greatly sought after by patients' (Cumston, 1987:217)

By the thirteenth century, however, universities including medical studies in their curriculums excluded women from study. Thereafter there is a notable absence of women in traditional medical histories, because they concentrated on documenting 'official medicine,' rather than the 'popular' medicine practised by the people. Despite the fact that non-official medicine has been poorly represented, women could be considered to have played a major role in health care delivery and have been more important than men in the use and continuity of cupping practice.

THE DECLINE IN CUPPING FROM THE MID TO LATE 1800s

By the mid to late 1800s cupping was sharply criticised by the medical fraternity and had fallen away as a popular method. There are a number of complex issues relevant to why this happened, so I will present only a couple of reasons. Firstly, it was during this period that the newly established scientific model of medicine began discrediting all other previously established traditional therapies in order to gain medical dominance. Secondly, the 'clinical gaze' which Foucault (1976) took to define medicine made the body transparent and looked at

and treated the inside in preference to the outside. Because cupping is a surface treatment, it was inconsistent with the new paradigm, which 'moved away from the personal contact of the manipulative and hands-on therapies of earlier times' (Theark, 1990:124). to become fascinated with the deeper layers of the body.

Opposition to cupping was therefore not based on a lack of effectiveness but because of its lack of "fit" with the growing interests and authority of the medical fraternity. Although cupping has remained popular in some areas of Europe, the 20th century has certainly seen it wane in Anglo-Saxon society. I think a major reason for this is due to the ideological effectiveness of medicine in winning virtual control over all matters related to health and illness. As part of this process, for example, with the Medical Registration Act of 1858, 'Parliament had achieved what the doctors never could - it had symbolically at least united the much-divided medical profession, by defining them over and against a common other, not to say enemy.' (Porter, 1987: 45).

This was relayed on to a set of social processes that stigmatised cupping and changed people's attitude to many traditional practices. For a time, cupping was reduced to the curiosity shelf of the past. However over the past couple of decades the tide has turned and people are rediscovering that some practices have plenty of merit, as well as reinstate their own ability for self-care.

