

INTERESTING and SURPRISING DENTAL TRIVIA

Dental Trivia is often requested by my readers. Do not try the following old "remedies", as they are for historical interest only and are not recommendations. See your dentist if you have a dental problem.

Ancient Chinese Toothache remedy - *'Roast a bit of garlic and crush it between the teeth, mix with chopped horseradish seeds or saltpeter, make into a paste with human milk; form pills and introduce one into the nostril on the opposite side to where the pain is felt'*. If the ache persisted they recommended arsenic pills be placed next to the tooth, killing the pain, the gums and bone, the nerves, and very likely the person.

Acupuncture was a common treatment. Of 388 needle sites on the body used for treatment of ills, twenty-six were for toothaches.

Treatment of cavities included removal of the affected tooth, filling it, and replacing the tooth in the socket. This was a highly unsuccessful procedure.

Japanese dental techniques were similar to the Chinese. One toothache remedy that was common in Japan involved fire. Swollen gums were cauterized by burning moxa plant, or wads of cotton, in the affected area of the mouth.

Removal of teeth was sometimes performed with the bare hands. The procedure was learned by removing wooden pegs driven into holes in boards.

A Tooth Ache Prayer - written about 5000 B.C. when many believed toothaches were caused by a 'Tooth Worm'. It was written:

'As the God Anu created the sky, the sky created the earth, the earth created the rivers, the rivers created the canals, and the canals created the marsh, the marshes created the Worm. The Worm came crying to Shamash, the Son, before the God Ea, asking to live in a tooth.'

Toothache sufferers could pray the following:

'O Shamash, because of my tooth which hurteth me, some ghost to whom I have not offered food, nor poured forth water is angry. To thee I pray that I may shut him in and cover him over. Like a moth whose tooth hurteth him not, so shall my tooth, too, not hurt me.'

The tooth-worm theory lasted for thousands of years. It was common to wear a bag of magic stones around the neck to treat, or protect from, the infamous 'Tooth Worm'.

Around 2250 B.C. it was written that physicians tried to smoke the worms out, by lighting henbane seed and beeswax and blowing the smoke into the mouth, then filling the cavity with a mix of gum mastic and henbane seed.

On treatment of teeth grinding - The following is a synopsis of a cure written on an ancient tablet for health care:

'Take a human skull and place it on a spread of apple-colored wool cloth across a chair. Bring a sacrifice, morning and evening for three days, and recite seven times (a conjuration) into the skull. The skull should be kissed seven and seven times by the patient before retiring, then he will become well.'

About that time, the first medical laws were written (Hammurabi's Code) in the name of Babylon's great ruler, who was a King, physician, and surgeon. Barbers at that time performed some minor surgical procedures, including tooth removal, as did some un-trained people. Penalties for unskilled or unsuccessful treatment could lead to the removal of the hands as an early malpractice solution.

Teeth were deemed very precious. If a person knocked out another person's tooth, they would supposedly have theirs knocked out. It was also written, 'If a slaves tooth was knocked out, that person was to pay the price of 1/2 a silver mine.' Later written, 'If a man miste out one of his servants' teeth he shall let him go free'. The axiom, "*an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,*" also indicates the value placed on teeth.

One may realize that there were no "Good ol' days" in dental care. It is easy to not appreciate how good we have it now. For more dental trivia there are some interesting books available. Due to space constraints, send a letter to my office if you would like the names of some interesting dental history books.