

X 2b

ABORIGINAL HYGIENE

ABORIGINAL HYGIENE

The long, long ages that have passed since man first tried his hand at healing his own and his friends' ailments, should point to a vast and fundamental difference between the ancient and modern methods of healing, yet in today's perfected science, antiseptics and massage have come down from man's first "Medicine Men".

Wood ashes, particularly the ash of some special tree or shrub growing in the runs of the various groups, has always been used to cover gangrenous wounds. Fine soft ash is rubbed into the newborn baby, and into the cicatrices which are cut on the bodies of men and women, in order to keep the wounds open, so that the keloids may develop healthily, and wounds received in tribal fights which would send a white man to hospital or grave, are simply filled with ashes and left to heal of themselves.

The art of massaging has its origin in magic. There is no such thing as ordinary illness amongst the aborigines, for, as they say, no one would get ill of themselves, it must have been evil magic that sent the illness, and the magic must be taken out of the patient or he will surely die. Every group has its "Mamu" or sorcerer, but it is usual in what are known as serious cases to call in a Mamu from a neighbouring tribe, as, if the patient dies, the local Mamu knows his own life or someone of his family will be in danger, but if the neighbouring Mamu loses his patient, a member of his group must be killed by magic. Liver complaints are not infrequent amongst the natives, and when the attack becomes acute, the Mamu is called upon to extract the evil magic. He first takes care to secrete a small object in his mouth or hands - a stone, small bone, or piece of wood, or even string, and going over to the patient, he kneels down and proceeds to rub and thump and really thoroughly massage the man's body, meanwhile discovering the spot where the chief pain lies. He then places the object in his mouth and leaning over the sick man he sucks the affected part for some time and triumphantly produces the cause of the illness! and as soon as the rough massaging has really done good work, the patient re-

covers, and the Mamu's services are paid for in food. The "object" is bought by the patient, and then the task of finding out who sent it is begun. The Mamu, if he has a grievance against some contiguous tribe, sees to it that the object he extracts shall be identified as coming from that tribe, and thus the Mosaic "eye for an eye" has been carried on through the ages. There are some seventeen customs amongst the natives analogous to those of the Jews of the Old Testament, several of them connected with sanitation, etc.

Water plays no part whatever in native "hygiene", but fire has been used to cauterise bad wounds. If a man breaks his leg or arm so badly that it cannot be treated with bark splints, he lights a small clear fire in a little trench or hollow, and placing the broken part across the trench he calmly sits, or sings groaningly until the broken part has been burnt off. He thus stops the flow of blood, and heals the wound. In the early years of white settlement in Western Australia, a native who had burned his leg off in this manner, came into the little soldier settlement of Albany. The regimental Doctor, seeing the jagged and burnt pieces of bone protruding, obtained the native's consent to make a clean cut, and promised to give him a new leg of wood to enable him to dispense with the long pole with which he propelled himself by jumps. The native bore the operation splendidly and a wooden "peg-leg" was made and fitted to his healed limb. He was greatly pleased with his new leg while in the little settlement, but the soft wet soil of his tribal run caused the wooden leg to sink to the haft at every step, and from a camp some ninety miles away from Albany he sent the peg-leg back by his young nephew to the kindly doctor, saying that he found the pole jumping the easiest way to travel. In the Murchison district (W.A.) in the early days of settlement, the child of a white woman became very ill, and there being no doctor within many miles, it looked as though the baby must die from want of medical attention. An old sorcerer who had been treated well by the family, with whom he was a sort of "general help", asked to be allowed to treat the child, and in despair the mother consented. He first greased his hands, then rubbed and massaged

the little creature gently and thoroughly, and after the massage sucked the little ribs and heart, the while the baby left off moaning and crying, and seemed to enjoy the operation. The baby got better and is I believe still living in the district. Needless to say that the sorcerer's well-being was secured for his lifetime by the grateful mother.

Although native patients in hospital or institution are always found gentle and appreciative of the nurse's attention, and will take the most noxious medicine without protest, yet they one and all, particularly the men, object to being washed; and one man in the Kalgoorlie hospital roared and screamed when he saw the nurse coming with basin and towel, continuing his screams during the process of bathing, finally running away from the hospital in disgust. To bath a native baby is to take a great risk, as if the baby dies, its death will be attributed to the bath. The writer never washes wee babies, but rubs their little bodies with olive oil, and in the case of weak or ill-nourished infants, with olive oil and brandy, and by this method has never yet lost a little baby that has been brought to the camp for treatment.

Natives must be decently covered when they come into civilisation, and it is to their practice of putting on half a dozen articles of clothing on any sort of day and taking them off at night that colds and lung troubles are due. The native has no "box" in which he may store his extra clothes, and if he or she leaves them in the wurli they may be commandeered by a relative, and so they are all put on, wet or dry, and then perhaps bartered one by one until there is nothing left but a loin cloth.

Colds and lung trouble have however always been prevalent amongst them, due mainly to the hectic excitement of dances and ceremonies. These dances may last for days, weeks or months, according to their importance, and during all that time, food is irregular and meagre, sleep is only obtained in snatches, and men and women have to sit naked and fireless, in the intervals between the wild movements that overheat their bodies, all this tending to weaken the system and render them easy victims to

the complaints. There was one group in the Upper Murchison area (W.A.) in which consumption had taken root, and every member of this group died of the malady. They believed that the deaths were caused by blood magic sent from a tribe to the northeast of them, and for every death in their camp, a member of blood-magic tribe had to be killed. When closer settlement took part in those parts, and the murders continued and became known, arrests were made, and finally the two last male members of the consumptive group died in Rottnest Island prison, where they had been sent for life. The writer saw them shortly before their death, and they firmly believed to the last that the blood magic had been powerful enough to follow them "across the water" to their prison home.

The aborigines have their own simple remedies for constipation, diarrhoea, etc., and these are so effective that they are often given in preference to the "white" remedies. Stump-tailed iguana is eaten for constipation, also other species of iguana, and the gum (edible) of the "walduri" (a species of acacia), is used for diarrhoea. The fat of snakes, iguanas and other reptiles, and the large and small grubs that feed on the roots of mallee and acacia and mulga, are extremely nourishing and are always special favourites with them. "White" food is very enticing at first, but let white people imagine themselves restricted to a purely aboriginal diet, and they will then understand the craving of the native for his own bush food. When a sick native has refused good white food, the patient has often been brought back to normal by giving him a few grubs and iguana.

Personality counts so much with them, for by them it is interpreted as Manu - magic - and one often finds that the actual fact of laying hands upon them and rubbing them is more appreciated than the food given them. Children, men and women, and old people will come to be "rubbed", whatever the ailment, and whether it is oil or vaseline, fat or lanoline, whatever the substance. it is the hands that are thought most highly of.

The poor souls have evolved a sort of remedy for venereal in which the dung of stumptailed and other iguanas, and even human ordure takes a part. The patient is taken away into the bush and fed on grubs, and any other bush delicacies procurable, and when he or she is young and otherwise healthy, the disease has been cured. One instance of this treatment effected on a young girl who had caught the disease quite early in her career of prostitution was quite successful. She regained her health, and became enormously fat and robust, but as she resumed her unhappy life at the command of the old man to whom she belongs, her second attack will probably be fatal.

In some instances the disease works extraordinarily quickly. One man who came on to Ooldea on the E.W. Line in August from his home in the Ranges area, succumbed to the disease after a visit to the Kalgoorlie district, dying at the Ooldea camp the day after his return. His "crowded hour" of our glorious civilisation just covered seven months.