

## Pamphlet # 26

### Aboriginal Peoples Contributions to Health and Medicines

#### 1 Medicines and Health

Many modern day medications and procedures that we take for granted were originally developed by the Aboriginal peoples of the Americas. Indigenous North American medicine was often more effective than European medical treatments at the time of early colonization. Early settlers noted that the Native peoples were more skilled at treating broken bones and infected wounds than European doctors were at the time. Additionally, early settlers noticed that the Native peoples had a significantly lower infection related infant and maternal mortality rate than the settlers. The colonists recognized the skills of Aboriginal healers and adopted many of their medical practices and treatments. In addition, the Aboriginal peoples of the Americas recognized the mental and emotional causes of certain diseases and how to work with the patient to cure such disorders, something not recognized by Western medicine until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, modern day scientists are realizing that many ancient Aboriginal medicines are very effective.

Surgical procedures such as *debridement*, the removal of dead, damaged tissue or foreign objects from wounds to speed healing, *skin grafting*, *sutures*, and *brain surgery*, using

trepanning to ease pressure on the brain due to injury or disease, were common methods that had high survival rates. Additionally, *dental care* was also practiced and highly advanced in comparison to European dental care practices at the time of contact.

The Aztec made dental fillings from gold, jade, hematite and turquoise beginning around 1000 B.C. while gold fillings would not appear in Europe until around 1450. Additionally, the Aztec had 49 plants that were used to prevent tooth decay It would be the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century before Western dentists understood preventative dentistry and it would not be until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that prevention would be emphasized in dental practice.

Many plants have been used by the Aboriginal peoples of the Americas to treat many diseases that Western science could not treat at the time of first contact.

The bark of the *Pacific yew tree* has been used for millennia by the Aboriginal peoples of the Pacific Northwest to cure internal injuries and wounds and, more recently, the Tsimshian peoples used it to treat cancer. Scientists isolated a compound in this tree in the 1960's that is now being used to *effectively shrink certain cancerous tumors such as ovarian and breast cancer*.

Another example of highly effective Aboriginal health practices not recognized by Western science until recently, is a certain

type of frog from Argentina that local Aboriginal peoples use as a means of healing open wounds. This "living bandage" was originally considered mere superstition by Western science but it has been recently discovered that the frog's skin contains certain chemicals that act as an antibiotic.

A good example of North American Aboriginal medicine that most people take for granted today is *Aspirin*. The active ingredient, acetylsalicylic acid, is found in the bark of certain species of *willow* and has been used by indigenous North Americans for centuries. Another remedy used was *Blackberry* which Native North Americans used to treat a wide variety of stomach problems which today is one of the major ingredients in *Pepto Bismol*.

*Anesthetics* were also utilized by the indigenous peoples of the Americas for general pain as well as during surgeries such as dental work or trepanning. In addition to the already mentioned aspirin, three main plant based anesthetics were utilized; *coca*, *peyote* and *datura*. *Coca*, more commonly known as cocaine, was used by the Inca of South America as both an internal and external pain killer and today is the basis for the common pain killer *Novocain*. In Mexico, the Aztec and Mayan peoples used peyote as both a pain killer and as a fever reducer and after contact, the American military used it as an anesthetic during the 1800's. North American Natives used the *datura plant*, more commonly known as *jimson weed* as both an external and internal painkiller in

much the same way as coca and peyote were used.

Native peoples of the American southwest and California regions used the *yerba santa* herb as a remedy for asthma and other respiratory problems such as bronchitis, colds and laryngitis.

Surprisingly, at the time of contact between Europeans and the Native peoples of the Americas, Europeans very rarely bathed as it was forbidden by the Roman Catholic Church and they were shocked by the frequency Native peoples bathed. The Inca peoples of Peru used copper pipes to bring hot and cold running water into their sunken bathhouses, very much like what was used during the time of the Roman Empire.

Also it must be remembered that many of the ingredients that are used today in a wide variety of *laundry detergents, soaps, shampoos and hair conditioners* have been used for millennia by Native peoples of the Americas. Some examples are *yucca root (American southwest), balsam (Blackfoot, Anishinabe and Kootenai), jojoba (Arizona and California regions), and sunflower oil (Aztec)*.

## 2. Aboriginal Medicines

Some other common modern day medicines and their origins are listed as follows:

**Foxglove:** A plant from which the modern day medication digitalis, used for heart disease, is

derived. It was used by Aboriginal North Americans for centuries to treat heart disease.

**Lady's Slipper:** Used by North American First Nations, this plant contains chemicals that act as antispasmodic (seizure prevention) as well as acting as a pain relieving sedative. In the colonial era, European physicians who had learned of it from Native peoples used it as a cure for sleep disorders.

**Buckthorn/Cascara Sagrada:** This plant was used by the Kootenai and other California First Nations. It contains chemicals that act as a laxative and is one of the most common ingredients in modern over-the counter laxatives.

**Wintergreen:** This herb contains methyl salicylate, which acts as both an antiseptic and an analgesic (external pain relief). Commonly found today in joint and muscle pain relief lotions as well as flavouring in food. Used by the Iroquois and the Lenni Lenape of the Northeast for joint pain. Also used as a cold remedy tea along the entire eastern coast of North America.

**Chili Peppers:** Chilies contain a chemical known as capsaicin which has proven to be a highly effective topical (external) pain reliever for arthritis, shingles, headaches and muscle pain, as well as being useful as a post-operative pain reliever for mastectomy patients.

For further information on the health and medical practices of the peoples of the

Americas, please refer to the list of sources provided.

## 3. Sources

Information compiled and edited by:  
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