

Historical Perspectives of Drug Treatments in Cancer Quackery

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Received date: August 25, 2014; Accepted date: December 15, 2014; Published date: December 20, 2014

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Abstract

The place of quackery is important in the history of medicine. In this context, cancer quackery is in the forefront of it. Therefore, English literature and foreign translations are searched from 1635 to 1886 in order to obtain some memorable perspectives of drug treatments in cancer quackery.

Historical Perspectives

Sir Macfarlane Burnet, [1] who is far famed for his pioneer work on cancer surveillance, recommended clearly in his Brailsford Robertson Memorial Lecture that scientists should acquaint themselves with historical antecedents. Therefore, this paper documents such antecedents in respect of the drug treatment modalities used by cancer quacks.

Quacks were presented in the 1725 *History of Physic* by Friend [2] concerning “how much quacks have prevailed in all ages.” As he put it, “There are so many little Arts used by Mountebanks and Pretenders to Physic, that an extensive treatise, had I a mind to write one, would not contain them all.”

Therefore, in the present paper, let me review the historical perspectives of the practice of quackery in the important field of the drug treatment of cancer. In fact, as Ackerknecht [3] exemplified, “The confusion of cancer with other tumours may explain at all times many reports of “cancer cures”, on which in turn at all times quacks have thrived.”

Cancer quackery was probably best known through the name of Plunket. In particular, according to Macbride’s 1772 account, [4] the composition of his remedy was kept a secret in Ireland by a family of that name and in England by those who bought it, but it was believed to consist of the things mentioned in the following note:

Take of the leaves and stalks of the ranunculus flammæus two pugils; of those of cotula foetida one pugil; white arsenic, two drachms; flowers of sulfur, one drachm. Mix the whole, and rub them into a powder. This powder, made into a paste with the white of an egg, is applied to the cancerous part which it is intended to corrode; and being covered with a piece of thin bladder, smeared also with the white of an egg, is suffered to lie on from twenty-four to forty-eight hours; afterwards the eschar is to be treated with softening digestive, as in ordinary cases.

Cases treated in this manner were studied by Young [5] in 1805. Incidentally, he included a penetrating picture of the use of the Plunket remedy by even a contemporary surgeon. As he saw it, the man “having bought the Plunket receipt, appears to have been determined to support it at an price even by the sacrifice of his character as a surgeon, in stooping to the mysterious artifices of a secret remedy...”

Cancer remedy often suffered the tragedy of being shrouded in secrecy. In fact, secrecy was a fundamental feature of cancer quackery. Thus, Morgagni [6] mentioned “a person who, by the application of a caustic herb, was said to destroy (cancer) radically” and related how in regard to the herb itself “the person himself conceal’d it as much as he possibly could.” On considering this secrecy aspect of cancer quackery, Sir Spencer Wells [7] in 1888 contrasted it with traditional practice by asserting that “we have no reason to fear a comparison between what we can do by fair and open means, and what really can be done, or ever has been done, by any cancer cure or any secret remedy.”

Remedy obtained from quacks was associated with both the impropriety of their methods and the dubiety of the results. In this context, in a case reported by Wiseman [8] in 1676, a woman with breast cancer “sent for the Empirick, who undertook to extirpate it by Escharoticks: and she bled to death in few days”. In another case of this disease recorded by Browne [9] in 1678, the quack, by “applying very attracting Medicine, drew...her out of her troubles by sending her into another world.” “Sometimes,” said Norford [10] of such occurrences in 1753, “the simplest Remedy, in the hands of the ignorant, becomes like a Sword in a Mad-man’s Hand”.

Hand in hand did some quacks operate. For instance, John Hunter [11] referred to two quacks, “Roderiguez and Flusius, who obtained considerable fame and fortune” by their artifices. On recalling one of their victims, the fellow “had been a life-guardsmen... and had got a never-failing (personal) receipt”. No wonder that, having such an available fortune, he was able to pay their demands.

The artful relief of the patient’s money was part and parcel of cancer quackery. Thus, if they can persuade the patient, they put them through to undergo some operation since “they get some money in hand” [12]. For instance, from Browne’s experience [9], there was the reported case of a woman from whom one quack drew “what she had into his own pocket”.

Doubtless, large amounts went with promises of sure cure. For example, in the case discussed by Browne, [9] a “Mountebank coming to this Town promised her... a perfect Cure. Wiseman [8] himself related that, in the case of a man with jaw tumour, “some Empiricks promised him great hopes of Cure by their Specificks”. “Like many other incurable diseases,” Billroth [13] wrote in 1878, that “carcinosis has become a camping ground for charlatanism, and even in the latest

times there have been those who, by means of some arcane or another, have professed to have a sure remedy for this disease.”

Bold advertisements were inseparable from the practice of cancer quackery. For instance, “Empiricks among us,” according to Wiseman, [8] “brag much of their skill in curing them.” Thus, Young [5] knew how their remedies were often defended “with all the violent assertions of quackery.” As Sir Spencer Wells [7] declared in 1888, “I heard only last week of certain cancer curers whose headquarters are at Brussels, but who have correspondents in London and Southampton. . . .” “There have been proofs of late,” he continued, “that female galvanic doctors are at work, and others calling themselves electro-homoeopaths, doing some harm, but not deserving the title of great empiricks.”

Boastful empiricks were identified by the old authorities as many an ignoramus. Thus, even the Plunket remedy was referred to as “an ignorant invention” [4]. For that matter, Browne [9] in 1678 distinguished between traditional medicine and quackery as follows:

This I bring in as a Caution to all younger Brethren, hoping it may direct them to use more Reason than Passion, Study than Ignorance in their Art; and not like Mountebanks fall on a sudden upon desperate matters, but rather with Judgment and Reason back their Art, and secure their Reputation.

Reputation, when acquired by quacks, was from long ago debatable. However, let us consider the other side of the orthodox/quack treatment coin! In this connection, it is noteworthy that Norford [10] perceived that “many of the ancient Physicians and Surgeons were Men of the greatest Parts, and indefatigable Industry . . . but in many of their chirurgical Operations, they seem to have acted with little more Knowledge or Judgment than our modern Mountebanks, Cowleeches, or Farriers.” Incidentally, as his own account of a case showed, this lack of knowledge persisted to his own day with the result that the patient tended to go from the quack to the doctor and back again:

An elderly Woman who had been afflicted with a schirrus in her left Breast, for several years, at length applied for Relief to a Pretender in Surgery, who ignorantly ordered an emollient Fomentation and Cataplasm to the grieved Part for some time: Afterwards the Tumour enlarging and growing extremely painful, a regular Surgeon was advised with; who wisely endeavoured to suppress its Growth, and restrain the Inflammation of the whole Breast; at the same time informing her, that those bad Symptoms were brought on by the imprudent Applications of her Pseud-Chirurgus: - He hearing that his Remedies had been found fault with, in the Surgeon’s Absence, went to his late Patient, and told her every particular Ingredient he had made use of; at the same time artfully insinuating, that to find Fault in such Cases was a Thing of Course, and that she was very sensible such simple Applications could not produce those bad effects - She in a great Measure believed him, and thought his Reasoning was just; and, I really think, to the last she never imagined that what he had done for her was prejudicial; especially as she did not find that Benefit she expected under the Care of a good Surgeon, viz. to have been cured. About two Years before her Death the cancer ulcerated, and was palliated under my Care in the last twelve Months of her Life.

Life was often hanging in the balance. Thus, as Wiseman’s case reported above illustrated, it was the trend among the patients of yester years to vacillate in their choice of doctor or quack: [8].

A person of about fifty years of age, having some sirrhous Glands in her left Breast, was impatient to have them discussed or suppurated: to

which purpose she consulted several of our Profession, and afterwards my-self. She was under the hands of some Empiricks, that were endeavouring by Poultices to break it: there was also a Fontanel made in the lower part of the Breast under the Tumour, she hoping that way to spend it. I advised her to for-bear the use of such Applications as might heat her Breast, telling her the ill consequence in breaking the swellings. She did not approve of what I said, but pursued her design. Sometime after, a false Suppuration was made in her Breast, and an effusion of Blood followed; and by the continued use of Poultices the Ulcer enlarged, and by frequent Bleeding her Body emaciated. She being very near wasted by an Eruption sent for me (again).

Incidentally, both doctor and quack were seen sequentially by the cancer patient in the old days. Perhaps, it was then difficult to choose between doctor and quack! Wiseman’s own experiences reveal to us how the one or the other practitioner was consulted [8]. For example, a patient of his was satisfied and “lived with more quiet of mind many years, and with much ease, and hath lately recommended others to me upon the same account.” On the contrary, another patient of his “enjoyed a good measure of health, and was my good Friend, till about a year after it was told her that one Mrs B. who laboured of a cancer in her breast, had caused a Mountebank to cut it off, and that she was thereby cured.”

Apparently, life was a gamble. Indeed, what were the possible factors not mentioned so far? Put differently, it may be asked thus: What contributed to cancer quackery? First and foremost, as Travers [14] averred in 1829, many a patient was ‘sanguine of recovery, and ready to impart their confidence to any man who is ignorant and unprincipled enough to promise boldly.’

Boldly conversant with the prevailing human frailty were the quacks. Thus, although basically ignorant, they were able, as Read [15] realized in 1635, to “make a shew of learning.” Little wonder that Wiseman [8] averred that only ‘the more prudent people’ in the society were those able to avoid their attention.

Definitely, factual healing was debatable because it was uncertain in those days whether the treated tumours were cancers or not. Accordingly, seeming cures were attributed to quacks. Naturally, the reputation gained in this way tended to be short lived. Thus, as Morgagni [6] exemplified, the quack “at first got himself a great reputation, as is frequently the case; but the success of his cures not corresponding to his fame, he was soon deserted.”

They may not be deserted when they were able to use the slender resources available to their medical contemporaries! For instance, when quacks give Mathew’s Pill, or Opium mixed with some Purgative. . . . “They do now and then alleviate the pain and thereby encouraged diseased people to commit themselves into their hands . . .” [8] Hands and tongues were the imposture’s mainstays. Thus, when they fail in their endeavours, they had a ready scape-goat to blame, namely, the unfavourable constitution of the luckless patient! Norford [10] exemplified this with a quack, who “surprised at finding his Patient immediately grow worse,” turned round and blamed “the Badness of his Constitution.”

Conclusion

According to Young, [5] medical men were prone to personify cancer. “As a thing so deeply rooted in its own sin and wickedness, as to be beyond the hope of reprieve-a hardened malefactor, denied every consolation but the knife.” “This negligence on the part of science,” he

went on, “has given proportionate scope to the invention of the quacks...” In other words, knife-shy patients were prone to flee from doctors in order to seek sanctuary with quacks, the latter being ever ready to try out non-surgical manoeuvres. For example, it was the appeal to the knife by Velpeau [12] and other doctors that compelled one woman with breast cancer to tarry for some months treating it bygone days by quacks. Thus, it is important to recognize nowadays that, owing to the prevailing circumstances of their times, the old cancer quacks obviously had a field day. However, with the on-going enlightenment of modern society, cancer quackery is necessarily becoming increasingly a vanishing venture.

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