

OLD HEALTH BELIEFS DIE HARD

By Dr. Derek Conte

In about 125 AD, the Egyptian astronomer, Ptolemy, declared that the earth was the center of our solar system. He explained the occasional retrograde (backward) motions of the planets during the year by saying they performed brief epicycles (loop-de-loops) on their way around the earth and then return to their normal orbits. Silly, you say? This belief held firm for 1,400 years until 1543, when Polish astronomer Nicolas Copernicus shook the world by asserting that indeed the sun was at the center of the solar system. This model made observational sense and led to German astronomer Johannes Kepler's three laws of planetary motion and later, English mathematician Isaac Newton's theory of gravitation. Many people, like Galileo, suffered and even died for lending their support to these ideas.

The health professions have a similar developmental curve. 2,500 years ago, in ancient Greece, the belief that the four elements of all matter in the universe: Earth, Air, Fire and Water, led to the concept of the four bodily humors ("moisture", in Latin) — Red (blood), Yellow (bile), White (mucus) and Black (suggestive of rotting flesh). This was the origin of medical science. Later, in the Middle Ages, emotional traits were assigned to these humors. A well-balanced person was thought to have a perfect blend of juices. If not, they could be re-balanced by the doctor

who might prescribe a purgative to induce vomiting, a diuretic to increase urination, a clyster (enema) to promote elimination, or he might choose bloodletting as the remedy. Bloodletting began with Hippocrates in ancient Greece and persisted until the mid-1800's when even a barber was qualified to drain your veins while you got a shave. The practice became big business and the recommendation for any illness was to bleed the patient 3-5 times of one quart of blood each time!

Leeches were used to provide "safe" bloodletting and maggots (fly larvae) were placed in open wounds to clean them. Maggots are being reintroduced today because they seem to prefer only the rotting flesh and leave the viable flesh behind. As recently as the 1930's, radical colonectomies (removal of the entire large intestine) were routinely performed on healthy people to rid them of the putrid poisons believed to reside there. It was thought the colon performed no important function. We know better now.

What of challenging the tightly-held beliefs of today that may not be true? This is the domain of the open-minded, curious and brave people among us. But we should all try to think for ourselves and search for the truth, even if it is very hard to do.

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