

History of Medicine

Transcription of Letters by Hahnemann (4)

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Summary

This letter written by *Hahnemann* to one of his patients reveals that he also advocated the external application of homoeopathic remedies and gave detailed instructions for hydrotherapy.

Keywords

Letter by *Hahnemann* – transcription – external application – hydrotherapy

As I have already mentioned in the second part of my series on transcriptions of letters by *Hahnemann*, the latter carried on a rather extensive correspondence with some of his patients, especially with those living farther away. By doing so, he saved his patients the cumbersome and stressful journeys not uncommon at that time, but he also accepted the disadvantage of not seeing his patients face to face and to have to rely on the indications they submitted in writing, the clarifications of which could only be obtained through further and more time consuming correspondence. However, *Hahnemann* obviously was able to devise successful therapies despite these limitations. Otherwise, neither he nor his patients would have been likely to put up, for any length of time, with this type of relationship between the physician and his patient.

The following letter, written by *Hahnemann* in Leipzig in 1815 and presently located in the History of Medicine Collection in the Archives of the

Hahnemann University in Philadelphia, constitutes another example of such a correspondence:

Dear Mr. Büchner!

I am pleased that after the big storm that raged through you, we have again made some progress towards the restoration of your health. God will provide further assistance.

I am allowing you to continue to wash with the powder of *hepar sulphuris* diluted in water all the unhealthy parts of skin, and those that have been unhealthy, but only for as long as you can observe some relief from doing so. If the improvement should come to a standstill, or if you observe any aggravation anywhere, you must stop these applications.

Please take the enclosed medicine in the same way as the previous one and continue your daily recordings. We now want to also strengthen the parts about the anus and the genitalia. With this objective in mind, you should avail yourself of a large tub which you place somewhat low and fill every evening to more than half its capacity with water drawn freshly from the well, pull down your pants and dip your buttocks two, three, four to five times deeply enough so as to immerse the whole behind and the genitalia for a few moments, after which you dry yourself and get dressed again in order to be able to walk about for a while, at least in the room. On the first occasion, two such dunkings may be enough, but after you have become somewhat accustomed to doing it, you should

do it four or even a few more times. Under these provisions, you should wash with the hepar solution only in the morning. If the dunkings agree with you, you may do them also in the morning (and in the evening) and move the washings with the hepar solution to the afternoon.

I am wishing you further success. Dr. Sam. Hahnemann L. the 18th of May 1815.

This letter illustrates that at the time when it was written, *Hahnemann* was not satisfied with mere summary descriptions of the patients' symptoms, but he obviously expected detailed descriptions in the form of daily entries in order to minimize as much as possible the disadvantages mentioned above and inherent in this form of communication with his patients.

It is interesting to note the instructions for the therapy given to patient *Büchner*, namely to wash certain parts of the body with a homoeopathic remedy diluted in water and the hydrotherapy, both at a time when he was taking medication (presumably) by mouth ("take the enclosed medicine in the same manner as the previous one...").

In the 1. edition of the *Organon* published in 1810, *Hahnemann* mentions already that the skin is also suited to absorb medication, that efficacy of the latter may be favorably influenced by rubbing it into the skin or by rubbing the skin prior to applying the remedy¹⁾. He still holds the same opinion in the 6. edition of the *Organon*, in which he furthermore points out that the concurrent oral absorption of the indicated medicine is particularly advantageous.²⁾ It is conceivable that *Hahnemann* might have used this procedure

for patient *Büchner*, but it is, unfortunately, not possible to determine whether the remedy enclosed with the letter was hepar sulphuris or not. If this was not the case, the patient would have been given two remedies concurrently, since the absorption via the skin has as much of a systemic effect as does that by mouth.

As far as the most conducive conditions for the absorption of medication are concerned, *Hahnemann* seems to have undergone a change of mind in the course of the years. Whereas in the 1. edition of the *Organon*, in 1810, he considered "skinless and wounded, or ulcerative parts"³⁾ to be best suited and he consequently recommended "washing all the unhealthy parts of skin, and those that have been unhealthy" with hepar sulphuris solution to patient *Büchner*, in 1837, in the 2. edition of the *Chronic Diseases*, he emphasized that the medication diluted in water be rubbed into a part of the body that was "least affected by disease (e.g. on an arm or thigh or calf that were not afflicted by skin problems, by pains or even cramps)"⁴⁾ In the 6. edition of the *Organon*, he expresses a similar opinion.⁵⁾

Even at the beginning of his medical practice, *Hahnemann* greatly appreciated hydrotherapy⁶⁾ and he accepted it in his later years as a "useful complementary procedure"⁷⁾ during homoeopathic treatment. The extremely detailed instructions given to the above patient and the frequency of the hydrotherapy recommended in this case exemplify *Hahnemann's* acceptance of this form of therapy.

Incidentally, *Hahnemann* considered pure water alone to be suitable for this purpose and he essentially opposed mineral baths because of their medicinal effects.⁸⁾

Notes

- 1) ORG I, § 259
- 2) ORG VI, § 284
- 3) ORG I, § 257
- 4) CK II, 1837. IX
- 5) ORG VI, § 285
- 6) Haehl II, 1922. 61-63
- 7) ORG VI, § 291
- 8) ORG VI, § 285, note.

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