

Random Trials and Affected Areas

In a world where the hi-tech has long since replaced the traditional healer, there yet remains something immensely beguiling about what is now commonly referred to as 'alternative' therapy. In the face of its apparent success, certainly its enduring popularity, the world of clinical effectiveness has reluctantly abandoned its no compromise hard line stance to adopt a rather more open-minded approach. Well designed clinical trials are therefore now seeking to establish the real effectiveness (or otherwise) of some of the more established alternative treatments such as acupuncture, homeopathy, or herbal remedies, compared with standard ones. The results, in some cases, are looking promising.

Traditional medicine worldwide is largely founded upon a combination of two basic principals: the native herbal complemented by ritualistic therapies. The one is used to treat the physical organism, the other uses symbols that work effectively with the psyche, there being an implicit recognition of the psychosomatic influence in many illnesses. But herbal medicine and magic are not all there is to traditional healing, as I was soon to find out.

Tadpole Tales

When Manuel and Atik left the house one afternoon saying they were going to look for tadpoles, I had no reason to know what a treat was in store for me. Or, perhaps better said, treatment. It might have seemed reminiscent of those days when a father would take his son down to the river with a net and jam jar to indulge in a little fishing, but Manuel's son Atik was now eighteen years of age. No, clearly they had something else in mind. A couple of hours later they re-appeared having apparently found some tadpoles after much searching.

Manuel periodically suffers from a flare up of severe conjunctivitis in his left eye, consequent upon an injury sustained several years ago. It had looked raw and sore for a number of days, aggravated by the dry conditions of summer, when strong winds in the mountains blow dust everywhere. Apparently he was planning to use the tadpoles to treat this condition. It seemed unimaginable and I asked if I could watch (and film) the process, being unconvinced how this could possibly be helpful in anyway, unless it was simply some form of traditional magic. Images of small black gelatinous blobs wriggling across the surface of the eye was all I could think of until I saw how large they actually were: about two and a half centimetres long, being precursors of the large frogs that dwell in these parts. It seemed ever more alarming by the moment.

Manuel settled down upon the floor and made himself comfortable. Some music was playing in the background and all seemed serene and tranquil. And, fishing out one of the tadpoles from the tub, Atik proceeded to hold his father's eye open with the fingers of one hand and then to wipe the tadpole's tail across the eye surface with the other. The tail has a certain sticky quality to it which apparently absorbs the blood, drawing it out from the eye membrane into the tail membrane in a sort of osmosis-like process. Manuel was quite calm, and reassured me that there was no discomfort or pain at all, that all you ever felt was a little cold on the surface of the eye. Apparently the treatment was a common one for people hereabouts suffering from similar problems and was considered to be very effective. I think this must be true otherwise why would anyone submit to having a tadpole tail introduced into their eyes in this way?

Several more treatments were planned before the tadpoles would eventually be released, complete with a small quantity of Manuel's blood staining the tips of their tails. Did they absorb it in some way? Or did it stay until the tail itself disappeared into the body of the maturing frog? All salient questions that were to remain unanswered. The following morning Manuel appeared looking pleased, his eye less inflamed than it had been the previous day. And, with several more applications, the eye indeed seemed to settle down, although the original injury had been severe enough to leave the eye ball always seeming a little redder than normal. But certainly no harm had been done and possibly some significant improvement achieved. I wondered what our own medical profession would think; whether the clinical community might ever be persuaded to carry out formal clinical effectiveness trials using standard treatment comparators. It seemed an intriguing idea, but rather unlikely given the years it has taken to evaluate many of the more familiar traditional remedies referred to above. I suspect we may have to wait a long time for the first formal randomised controlled trials to appear in the clinical literature. But I amused myself by imagining how they might be:

"The effectiveness of tadpole tails versus conventional therapies in the treatment of severe conjunctivitis: a randomised controlled trial".

It all reminded me of the time last year here when I had watched the local old wise woman and healer using a live guinea pig to diagnose a patient's illness. The hapless creature, looking rather like a saggy bean bag, was whacked hard all over the body of the patient until, barely alive, it was killed and then disembowelled to offer a view upon the patient's potential medical problems. Unquestionably the animal suffers internal injuries as a consequence of being treated in this way and these are then interpreted as being signs of the corresponding illness in the patient. At the time I

declined the proffered diagnosis and went straight for the treatment instead, which was the same whatever the diagnosis anyway: a very effective whole body massage. There seemed no point in sacrificing a guinea pig first. But even then it teased my imagination to think how it might appear in the sorts of learned medical journals it was once my lot to review:

“The effectiveness of using live guinea pigs for diagnosis of serious illness versus standard radiography: a randomised controlled trial.”

We can but dream.

But there are a wide range of traditional remedies employed in the northern Andes; guinea pig diagnosis or tadpole tail treatments are just rather more dramatic than most. The vast majority of ailments are treated simply with the range of different medicinal plants that grow hereabouts. Some of them we already know about and pay large sums to purchase pre-processed from health stores or pharmacies anyway: aloe vera – ‘*sabilla*’ – is a classic. This little succulent grows everywhere in the region and every house will commonly have several growing in the garden. It is very effective in the treatment of superficial wounds like burns and grazes.

Last year I had acquired a very painful saddle sore in a rather embarrassing area and felt disinclined to consult my family (or anyone) directly for treatment advice. But it was clear that its very location might impede normal healing with time. Mercifully help was immediately at hand in the presence of several aloe cactuses growing right outside my *cabaña*. I applied some of viscous sticky sap regularly to the affected area, and sure enough, in a couple of days, the sore had healed completely. But the native herbal is itself complemented by other substances coming from the animal and not just the plant kingdom. I have learned of infected wounds being treated by the application of a live toad which is tied to the affected area. Over a period of days, the infection is supposedly drawn from the wound and into the toad, which (unsurprisingly) dies. But I imagine it has as much to do with the natural antibiotic compounds that some of these creatures produce in their skins, that originally served to make them toxic to predators.

Bathing with Nettles

A standard prophylactic treatment in these parts is one I can say, with some pride, that have also partaken of. I remember when I first heard about it and realised, with a sort of sinking feeling, that I was going to have to try it out for myself. Although I have never seen myself as being particularly masochistic, you may doubt this after reading about the treatment. It is not used to treat particular conditions as such, but

is held to be an invaluable way for combating the influence of negative energy in general. Anyone who is experiencing problems in their life, whose animals die, whose crops don't prosper, who suffer sickness, or misfortune in general, set off for the local waterfalls at Peguche, together with a close friend or relative as an assistant, armed with a large bunch of stinging nettles. If this sounds alarming let me assure you that it is. Stripped down to their (old) underwear, the patient stands under the icy waters (remember we are at between 2,000 and 3,000 metres up in the northern Andes here) and, arms held out, is beaten head to foot, front and back with the stinging nettles. Finally, they are encouraged to take the wet nettles and screwing them up into a ball, to rub them all over their body. Then, consigning the wet underclothes (and the crushed nettles) to the river, they don fresh ones and walk away from the falls, following a different path to the one taken to bring them there. And they never look back: at the pathway, the waters, or more particularly the underwear as it floats away downstream. This would be to re-identify with the old negative energies, now washed away.

It might sound extreme, but the folk in these parts believe in it implicitly. So much so that many of them take themselves off to the waterfalls at Peguche twice a year – at mid summer and again at the new year – to perform a sort of prophylactic treatment, rather than simply waiting for misfortune to strike. Anecdotes abound too, like the time when two thieves were caught in the community. They were submitted to a public stripping, bathing and nettling punishment before being handed over to the police. Now, apparently, one of the thieves at least has successfully started his own little restaurant enterprise which is flourishing down in Ibarra, widely interpreted as being an effect of the bathing with nettles flushing away his negativity. It seems persuasive.

My own experience was rather burlesque to say the least. Laura, Manuel's wife was my assistant. Her young daughter Laurita and the dog Capitan, who had accompanied us and settled down together to watch the whole show, were duly sent away. I didn't feel I could deal with an audience. I had long been reassured that the burning stinging effects of the nettles counteracts the cold of the water, and vice versa, but it was to prove a wretched subterfuge. For me anyway. I shivered and gasped beneath my little icy torrent, flinching as the nettles made contact with my skin, burbling some form of prayer to try and express the desperation of the experience. It certainly felt like some form of sacrifice, an offering of suffering to the Divine. However, we were not at the falls of Peguche, but in a little shady grotto down in the quebrada with an artificially contrived waterfall instead. With an insufficient flow of water to do the job, I was reduced to wrapping my pants around a stone and hurling them down in the direction of the quebrada, whereupon they snagged onto an overhanging branch and hung flag-like there, like some sort of

statement. I was the first person to inaugurate the little grotto. The long term plan had been to make it into a sort of therapeutic venue for other visitors to use, so I worried what sort of an impression my pants would make, hanging limply from a branch nearby, just out of reach. Perhaps it would be seen like those places where miracle cures take place, where the crutches of the afflicted, now healed, are triumphally left behind to encourage those who follow. Probably not. Manuel later smilingly reassured me they could always throw stones to bring them down. So when I returned there earlier this year I looked anxiously to see if the tattered remnants were still hanging on there. As nothing was to be seen, I could only presume, with relief, that the season's heavy rains, or else a stone throwing competition, had indeed consigned them to a final and merciful oblivion deeper into the quebrada.

A Place of Myth and Mystery

Lying at a distance of around three hundred meters west of the house (there is another about the same distance to the east), the quebrada has become a place associated with mystery and ambivalence. It is where visitors are always taken to see the different medicinal plants which abound there. Formed from deep wide crevices down through the volcanic bedrock, full of undergrowth, pebbles and rocks, its deep, humid, green enclosed micro environments form another world. 'Wolves' (an Andean fox species) make their dens here, emerging in the depths of night to forage, preying upon any hapless unguarded domestic animals they come across. It is a place of legend, where people either fall to their deaths (usually whilst inebriated and returning from some local festivity) or otherwise experience miraculous survivals. It is a place where, at dusk, the strange unearthly whistling of nocturnal birds translates into the devil whistling in the dark (except I thought it was only us common mortals who had to do that). The quebrada is usually dry; only during the seasonal rains do rivers spring up to form torrents along them. All sorts of domestic animals who successfully make their bid for freedom end up here: feral guinea pigs abound; occasional llamas too. The calf of the family's cow leapt once too often in his youthful high spirits to fall over the edge to his death here. I have fallen here too, mercifully to no such dramatic conclusion however. But it conveniently leads me back to my tale of traditional treatments again.

Random Trials

The first time I fell I was tagging along with one of the medicinal plant walk tours. I slipped upon the steep little pathway leading up out of the quebrada and came down heavily upon my knee, grazing it and bruising the bone quite seriously. Manuel immediately rushed up, all concern, and offered to apply the ubiquitous nettles to

the affected area. But I declined. The pain was already sufficient to bring tears to my eyes, so I struggled to my feet and hobbled on back up the pathway, angry with myself for my clumsiness and struggling not to cry in public. There was a painful swelling just below the knee, followed by dramatic bruising, working its way through diverse shades of purple, blue and finally green as the days wore by.

So it was that about a month later I found myself participating in an unplanned trial of an indigenous remedy all by myself. Manuel and I had just returned from a horse riding trek up the volcano Imbabura. The day had been sublime: hardly a cloud in the sky, the views amazing. Overall a good time had been had by all; certainly by me. If I had been at all concerned about falling from the horse and injuring myself then I needn't have been, as it seems I am ever more a danger to myself on foot than on horse back. Five minutes after dismounting back at the house I had stumbled over a paving stone and fallen heavily again, this time on the other knee. Exactly the same place was affected: the tibia bone just below the joint. This time Manuel was too quick for me though. To polite apologies my trouser leg was yanked up, a handful of nettles growing conveniently close by was seized and Manuel rubbed the leaves hard onto the wound: another serious graze which was swelling rapidly. I was too shocked and in pain to be able to make an objection quickly enough. But by the next morning the wound had scabbed over, there was no swelling, and the only colouring to remain was the chlorophyll from the nettles. No swelling, no bruising, no hobbling. Impressive. But doubtless the clinical world would require several dozen more participants in the trial than merely myself to give the outcome any credence however.

And my experience of bathing with nettles seemed to have been auspicious after all. For a long time afterwards I had no signs whatever of having any illnesses. A friend of mine suggested that the netting had probably served to boost the immune system; a good way of warding off 'negative energies' indeed. But I must confess that my enthusiasm waned after this and I have never once felt tempted to stand under a household cold shower armed with a bunch of stinging nettles simply as a way of boosting my immune system. The average household bathroom evidently lacks the sort of mystique that abounds down in the magical quebrada, on Imbabura's slopes.

.....