Would Ellen White favor medicines used today?

The twentieth century is characterized by a radical change of medications used to treat disease.

By ALBERT E. HIRST

Ellen White condemned the use of poisonous drugs, such as calomel, strychnine, and opium, that were in vogue for the treatment of disease in the past century and recommended instead the use of natural or simple remedies. She advised that “we cannot expect the Lord to work a miracle for us while we neglect the simple remedies He has provided for our use.” “Nature’s simple remedies will aid in recovery without leaving the deadly aftereffects so often felt by those who use poisonous drugs.” She added that God “has supplied in the natural world remedies for the ills of man.” She indicated that “simple herbs . . . can be used for the recovery of the sick, whose effect upon the system is very different from that of those drugs that poison the blood and endanger life.”

Ellen White’s confidence in the natural world as a source of remedies for human ills has been confirmed abundantly. Many new, useful medicines have been discovered as the result of a worldwide search for plants of medicinal value. Nearly half of the medicines in current use are of natural (plant) origin. When a plant or herb has been found to be effective against a disease, it often has proved possible to isolate the effective ingredient, which then can be administered as a single (or simple) remedy in treating disease. Such medicines have not only proved to be effective but are remarkably safe and nontoxic when compared with medications previously used in the treatment of disease.

One of the great discoveries in medical history was the effectiveness of cinchona bark for the treatment of malaria, a mosquito-transmitted fever. This fever has been the world’s most devastating disease, with an annual death toll of 2 million and another 200 million sufferers only half alive. The active ingredient in cinchona bark, quinine, was isolated in 1820 and has continued to be useful in treating malaria, despite the discovery of other antimalarial drugs in the twentieth century.

Ellen White’s good judgment in the use of quinine was shown in her response to a letter from Elder J. E. Fulton in the South Pacific. He had written that a number of our workers were dying of malaria but had refused quinine because of her statements in the Testimonies. She asked Dr. S. P. S. Edwards to respond to the letter because he had had favorable results combining the use of quinine with physical therapy in treating malaria. When the letter was completed she added a postscript across the bottom: ”If quinine will save a life, use quinine. Ellen G. White.”

Her opposition to quinine was based no doubt on the fact that it was used as an ingredient in many of the tonics and stimulants in patent medicines so widely advertised for over-the-counter purchase in her day. Such medications were not merely worthless, but harmful. She did not condemn the use of quinine for malaria, a disease for which it was the most specific remedy known. Her postscript on the letter stated a principle that is useful in evaluating any medicine that may be toxic to the body: Use of a drug must be based on proof of its lifesaving qualities. Such evaluations seldom were performed in the previous century, but are routine today.

Undoubtedly the most valuable medicines developed in the twentieth century have been antibiotics, sometimes called miracle drugs because the response to them is so dramatic when compared with medications previously used. Penicillin, the first antibiotic, initially was discovered in a natural source, a mold, and later cultured commercially, becoming available generally for therapeutic use in the mid-1940s. The miraculous effects of penicillin become apparent soon after it is administered. The critically ill, feverish child with lobar pneumonia often responds dramatically within 24 hours by a drop in fever and a slowing of the respiratory rate and pulse. In a matter of a few hours the critically ill child often is on the way to recovery.

Antibiotics have been developed

In the years since penicillin was introduced, many additional antibiotics have been developed that have made possible effective therapy against most of the disease-producing bacteria. Even bacterial endocarditis, an infection of the heart valves, previously almost uniformly fatal, responds in the majority of cases. Also infections that cause boils, carbuncles, sore throat, pneumonia, and kidney and bladder diseases respond rapidly.

Antibiotics have greatly shortened the time required to treat serious infections. No longer are there pneumonia wards or sanitariums for the treatment of tuberculosis. Most tuberculosis sanitariums have either closed their doors or converted to other uses. Diseases such as osteomyelitis and mastoiditis, formerly common, have almost disappeared.

While antibiotics may have toxic manifestations, the unfavorable effects are well known and usually can be avoided by careful monitoring of the patient’s progress. That is why antibiotics are sold by prescription only and require close medical supervision for safe treatment.

Mental illness has filled more hospital beds in the United...
States than cancer, heart disease, and tuberculosis combined. For every patient in a mental hospital there has been another on the outside not sick enough to be in a hospital, but not well enough to lead a useful life. It is not surprising that the number of beds required for mental patients increased continually until the middle of the present century.

In 1952 an ingredient called reserpine was isolated from the tropical rauwolfia plant and proved to have remarkable tranquilizing effects with little or no sedative effect. The discovery of reserpine, the first of a series of mind-affecting drugs, started a revolution in the treatment of mental diseases. Reserpine seemed to give the patient an insight into his mental condition, as though he were looking at himself from without, and enabled him to respond better to treatment, including counseling or group therapy.

In recent years a number of additional tranquilizing medicines have been introduced that have proved superior to reserpine by not producing the depression that sometimes follows its use. For the first time in history such medications, combined with counseling, have made possible a reduction in the need for hospital beds for mental patients. In 1955 more than a half million beds were occupied by mental patients in the United States. Nineteen years later there were fewer than half that many. Use of such medication has made practical the maintenance of many mental patients in community-based services, avoiding the expense of hospitalization and resulting in savings of millions of dollars.

Progress in cancer treatment

One of the most encouraging areas in medical therapy has been the significant progress in the treatment of certain kinds of cancer that previously were uniformly fatal. Two active antineoplastic agents, vincristine and vinblastine, have been isolated from a tropical variety of the common periwinkle plant. Vincristine, along with other drugs or X-ray irradiation, has proved useful in producing remissions in acute lymphocytic leukemia in childhood, with as many as 80 percent remaining free of the disease for up to ten years. Vinblastine, along with other agents, produces remissions in 60 to 80 percent of cases of Hodgkin’s disease.

A number of tumors, including malignant tumors of the kidney and bone in children, as well as tumors of the breast and certain lung cancers in adults, have responded to chemotherapy. The medicines used for a cure of cancer are often toxic and must be administered under close supervision of a physician, particularly one who has had special training and experience in cancer therapy. There is only one justification for the use of such hazardous medicines: their ability to save lives!

Ellen White showed a keen interest in the development of new remedies for human disease. She stated, “The idea which you hold, that no remedies should be used for the sick, is an error,” and indicated that “God does not heal the sick without the aid of the means of healing which lie within the reach of man.”

She described her personal experience in the successful use of charcoal as a poultice for treating inflammation or painful injuries, and orally for some forms of indigestion. Activated charcoal recently has been considered the single most effective agent against a variety of poisons, and is considerably more effective than the so-called universal antidote (two parts charcoal, one part magnesium oxide, and one part tannic acid). Activated charcoal usually is mixed with water to form a slurry, which when taken by mouth clings tenaciously to the swallowed poison to prevent its absorption. Charcoal has proved effective against bichloride of mercury, strychnine, morphine, barbiturates, and other poisons.

Many more medications of plant origin have been isolated and have helped to improve both the quality and the length of human life. They include analgesics, antispasmodics, laxatives and cathartics, muscle relaxants, local anesthetics, medicine for heart failure or heart irregularity, and drugs such as ippecac to induce vomiting in cases of poisoning.

Mention of the contribution of remedies of natural origin in this century also should include medicines derived from the animal world, particularly the hormones that have highly specific actions in various organs. Insulin, cortisone, adrenaline, estrogens, and desiccated thyroid are probably best known. Prior to the discovery of insulin 60 years ago, the average survival of a patient with diabetes was less than five years. Today an adult diabetic may expect to live a normal or near-normal life span.

Although most of the medicines available today are much safer and more effective than those of the past century, they are not completely safe and should be administered only under the supervision of a physician.

The combination of safer medications, better medical care, including vaccination for contagious diseases, and better living habits (such as healthful exercise, proper rest, better working conditions, and more nutritive diets) are doubtless responsible for the greatly increased longevity in this century. The average life expectancy at birth was 32 years in 1800, 41 by 1850, 50 by 1900, and 67 by 1950. Currently a man can expect to survive until 70 and a woman to 77 years of age, a remarkable tribute to the progress that has been made in medical care in this century.

To be concluded

REFERENCES

2. Ibid., p. 281.
3. Ibid., p. 289.
4. Ibid., p. 288.
16. Ibid., p. 294.
17. Ibid., p. 296.
19. Alkman, loc. cit.