

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN
MEDICINE
THE PAPYRUS EBERS

Translated from the German Version

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*Those about to study Medicine, and the younger
Physicians, should light their torches at the fires
of the Ancients.*

ROKITANSKY

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CHAPTER XVI

DISEASES OF THE EYES

NINE pages of the original papyrus are devoted to eye-conditions, a fact which need occasion no surprise to anyone acquainted with that country even after the thousands of years that separate us from that far-distant period. In a separate volume published in 1889 Ebers gave a detailed translation of this interesting chapter, differentiating the following conditions:

Blepharitis
Blindness
Carcinoma
Cataract
Chalazion
Chemosis
Ectropion
Entropion
Granulation
Hæmorrhage
Hydrophthalmus
Inflammation
Iritis
Leucoma
Ophthalmoplegia

DISEASES OF THE EYES

Pinguecula
Pterygium
Staphyloma
Trichiasis

To improve the sight a 'lotion' prepared by warming Chips-of-a-new-hennu-pot in Fresh Milk was recommended. Another lotion could be prepared by combining Cream with the Milk-of-a-Woman-who-has-borne-a-Son. Apply to the eyes frequently, is added. A number of salves are also given in each of which Collyrium figures. Thus in one the Collyrium is simply combined with Honey; in another with Honey and Sap-from-Fresh-Onions; in another with the Marrow-of-an-Ox; in another with Goose-grease and Water; in another with Incense and Real Lapis lazuli; in another with Antimony, Copper-vitriol, Writing-fluid, and Onions; and in still another with Writing-fluid, Myrrh, Opal-resin, Arabian-wood-powder, and Saltpetre-from-Upper-Egypt.

For Bleary Eyes one beat up Myrrh, Onions, Verdigris, and Cyperus-from-the-North, with Antilope-dung, Clear Oil, and Entrails-of-the-qadit-animal. This could be painted on with a Vulture's feather. Fortunately for Bleary-eyed panel patients of that day, and for those whose means did not run to Antilopes and Vultures (not to mention qadit-animals) the homely Ass—as so often before—stepped into the breach and offered himself, or rather part of himself, for their benefit:

ANOTHER REMEDY

Ass's Tooth

Mix in Water and apply around the Patient's eyes so that he recovers quickly.

The remedy does not sound very convincing but it has the merit of being clean and as such is infinitely to be preferred to the 'remedy' employed by a recent patient of the writer who for the three weeks preceding had been vigorously (and to his surprise unavailingly) bathing his bleary eyes, night and morning, with his own urine!

A simple poultice of Incense and Crocus, equal parts, often sufficed to clear up Bloodshot Eyes. If it did not a more complicated poultice composed of Onions, Verdigris, Collyrium, and Arabian-wood powder, crushed 'to a powder' with Ink and Water was recommended. Then there was another:

ANOTHER TO DRIVE OUT BLOOD IN THE EYES

Two Clay vessels: in one put powdered Fruit-of-the-Dompalm and Milk-of-a-Woman-who-has-borne-a-Son. In the other Cow's Milk. Keep moist. In the morning bathe both eyes from the Fruit-of-the-Dompalm. Next wash the Eyes with the Cow's Milk four times for six days.

Xanthelasma seemingly proved a troublesome condition, for after laying down various remedies the

Scribe thought it advisable to impart some ginger into the treatment:

ANOTHER TO DRIVE OUT FAT-IN-THE-EYES

Red-lead I

Goose-grease I

Smear the eyes therewith.

SEE TO IT!

Another remedy approximated more to the modern treatment of the disease:

ANOTHER TO DRIVE OUT FAT-IN-THE-EYES

Knife-stone

Mix in Fresh Milk and apply thereto very often.

To-day it is the Knife instead of a Knife-stone that we apply to the eye, while the patient is instructed to drink the Fresh Milk.

'To him whose two eyes suffer from a flow of matter' a poultice of Clay-from-a-Statue, Leaves-of-the-Castor-oil-tree, and Honey, is advised. To restore the lustre of the eyes one could apply a poultice of Onions, Resin, and Verdigris, crushed in the Milk-of-a-Woman-who-has-borne-a-Son. If a film covered the eyes the remedies were many, but two will suffice:

TO DISPEL THE FILM IN THE EYES ON THE FIRST DAY

Water-from-the-Bird-pond I

Whether this was drunk or merely applied to the eyes does not appear; but fortunately in the next remedy there was no room for doubt:

ANOTHER REMEDY FOR THE FILMING-OVER WHICH
RISES IN THE EYE

Dried-excrement-from-the-Body-of-a-Child I
Honey I
Put in Fresh Milk and then apply to the Eyes.

Leucoma was a complaint that set these far-off Oculists on their mettle. They tried to coax it away with a lotion of Cream and Milk, or another of Collyrium, Ink, and Water. These failing they ground some Ebonywood and Collyrium to powder and applied it. Next they dressed the eyes with a poultice of Powdered Granite. Then getting desperate they tried a 'paste' made from Collyrium and the Bile-of-the-abdu-fish. Finally they resorted to Magic, plus the Brain-of-a-Tortoise mixed with Honey:

ANOTHER TO DRIVE OUT THE WHITE GROWTH IN THE
EYES

There is a Shouting in the Southern Sky in the
Darkness.
There is an Uproar in the Northern Sky.
The Hall of Pillars falls into the Waters.
The Ship-folk of the Sun-god beat their oars so
that the heads at his side fall into the water.
Who leads hither what he finds?

I lead forth what I find.
I lead forth your heads.
I lift up your necks.
I fasten what has been cut from you in its place.
I lead you forth to drive away the God of Fevers
and all possible Deadly Arts.

SO MANY THERE ARE.

A formula to repeat over the Brain-of-a-Tortoise
that is mixed in Honey, and then laid on the
Eyes.

Cataract was another condition which had the
Ancients at their wits' end. Goose-grease and Honey
was tried as a poultice; Isinglass and Verdigris;
Lapis lazuli, Milk, Incense, and Crocodile-earth.
But how intractable this disease must have proved
itself is revealed in the call made to the gods to re-
inforce the remedy:

ANOTHER TO DRIVE OUT CATARACT IN THE EYES

Come, Verdigris!
Come, Verdigris!
Come, Thou Fresh One!
Come, Efflux from the Eye of the god Horus!
It comes, That which issues forth from the Eye
of Tum!
Come, Juice that gushes from Osiris!
He comes to him, he drives away from him Water,

Matter, Blood, Inflammation of the Eyes,
Mattery-discharge, Blindness, Dripping Eyes.
This the God of Fever works all Deadly Arts, the
uxedu of every kind, and all things evil of these
eyes.

SO MANY THERE ARE OF THEM.

Words to be spoken over Verdigris mixed with
Beetle-wax.

Add Cyperus thereto and carefully apply to the
Eye.

Another growth in the eye, Pterygium, was not
looked on kindly, judging by the remedies which these
people appeared ready to submit to. Certainly the
Scribe leads off with an inoffensive poultice of Honey-
comb, following it with another of Beetle-wax, but
these must have proved useless for he soon passes on
to more complicated and stronger remedies. Excre-
ment-of-the-henut-bird, is recommended, mixed up
with Sea-salt and Incense; then descending from the
clouds he sets down another composed of Lizard's
dung, Collyrium, Soda-from-Upper-Egypt, and Honey.
Another poultice is composed of Black Knife-stone
and Crocodile-earth, mixed up with Honey and
flavoured with Incense. He made an attempt at a
golden-eye ointment, too, when he crushed some
Collyrium in the Egg-of-a-Vulture; but what the
colour of the following turned out to be only a brave
man would say:

ANOTHER TO DRIVE OUT PTERYGIUM

Red-lead	I
Powdered-wood-from-Arabia	I
Iron-from-Apollonopolis-parva	I
Calamine	I
Egg-of-an-Ostrich	I
Saltpetre-from-Upper-Egypt	I
Sulphur	I
Honey	I

Make into one and apply to the Eyes.

Eyes which suffered from a 'flow of matter' were
dismissed with a mere couple of remedies. Clay-from-
a-Statue was ground up in Honey along with some
Leaves-from-the-Castor-Oil-tree, and applied to the
eyes. The second remedy was not so easily put up.
Some Real Collyrium was soaked in Water for four
days; then for another four days it was soaked in
Goose-grease. It was now washed in the Milk-of-a-
Woman-who-had-borne-a-Son, and allowed to dry for
nine days. Thereafter it was crushed with some
Myrrh, made up into a ball, and rubbed on the eye.

The victims of ingrowing eyelashes must have been
a veritable godsend to the rising ophthalmologist in
Ancient Egypt. At the same time they must have
proved a very severe drain on the live-stock of the
country, as may be seen from a perusal of some of the
remedies prescribed for that irritating affliction:

TO DRIVE OUT TRICHIASIS

Myrrh	I
Lizard's Blood	I
Bat's Blood	I
Tear out the Hairs and put thereon in order to make him well.	

TO PREVENT THE HAIR GROWING INTO THE EYE AFTER IT HAS BEEN PULLED OUT

Incense-ground-in-Lizard's-dung	I
Cow's Blood	I
Ass's Blood	I
Pig's Blood	I
Dog's Blood	I
Stag's Blood	I
Collyrium	I
Incense	I

Crush, rub into one in the different kinds of Blood, and place on the part whence the Hair has been pulled out so that it may not grow again.

ANOTHER

Bat's Blood	I
Rim-of-a-new-hennu-vessel	I
Honey	I
Powder and place where the Hair has been pulled out.	

ANOTHER

Fat-of-an-Ox	I
Olive Oil	I
Entrails-of-Moles	I

Crush into one, put on the fire, and put in the place of the Hair.

ANOTHER

Brain-of-the-uuat-bird	I
------------------------	---

Smear a Vine-leaf therewith and put in the place whence the Hair has been pulled out.

ANOTHER

Wasp's dung	I
Red-lead	I
Urine	I

Mix and put in the places where the Hair has been pulled out.

Still another eye-condition which set these Ancients thinking was Blindness. Only three remedies were given for this calamity. The first, a 'lotion' made by crushing Dried Myrrh in Sour Milk, we may be sure accomplished nothing. The second, however, a poultice of Powdered Onions, most assuredly made the blind man see stars. The third remedy spared the patient somewhat, the disease being attacked through that less-sensitive organ, the ear:

ANOTHER AGAINST BLINDNESS

The Two Eyes of a Pig; remove the water
therefrom

True Collyrium

Red-lead

Wild Honey

Crush, powder, make into one, and inject into
the Ear of the Patient. Thereby he will at
once recover. When thou hast seen properly
to this mixing, repeat this Magic Formula:

I HAVE BROUGHT THIS THING AND PUT IT IN ITS
PLACE. THE CROCODILE IS WEAK AND POWER-
LESS.

(Twice).

'For the Drawing-together of the Pupil of the Eye,'
whatever that may mean, one bathed the eye frequently
with a lotion made by crushing Shavings-from-
Ebony-Wood with Soda-from-Upper-Egypt in Water.
For a swelling in the Nose caused by inflammation of
the tear-sac a salve composed of Collyrium, Dried
Myrrh, Arabian-wood powder, and Honey, was rubbed
in for four days. 'MARK THIS WELL (the Scribe adds),
FOR IT IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO.' Another eye-salve
is prescribed for 'Driving out Tumours in-the-Head,'
while the Scribe also finds room to quote two salves
for general use: one 'AS PRESCRIBED BY THE PRIESTLY
PHARMACIST Xui,' the other 'AS TOLD US BY A JEW
FROM BYBLOS.' As well he provides against any
obscure ailment of the eye not specifically dealt with
by him:

REMEDY FOR THE EYE WHEN SOMETHING EVIL HAS
HAPPENED TO IT

A Human Brain

Divide it in halves.

To one half add Honey and anoint the Eye
therewith in the Evening.

Dry the other half, crush, powder, and anoint the
Eye therewith in the Morning.

To correct Squint, Collyrium, Red-lead, and Soda
were beaten into a paste and applied to the wandering
eye. When the futility of this became apparent, a
poultice of Onions, Granite, and Resin, was tried.
This in turn failing to straighten the squinting optic,
the animal world was combed for a remedy:

TO DRIVE AWAY SQUINTING IN THE EYES

Tortoise-brain I

abra-ointment I

Apply to the Eyes.

The final choice falling on the Tortoise because of the
comparative rarity of cross-eyed tortoises in Ancient
Egypt, it may be presumed.

Finally we have several remedies for 'Hotness in the
Eyes,' a condition which without doubt must have been
visited rather frequently on those driven for various
reasons to place themselves under the care and treat-
ment of an Oculist of the Pharaohonic period. As an
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eye-cooler 'Baked Ox-liver, placed carefully thereon' does not sound very hopeful, but Soda-from-Upper-Egypt (even when dissolved in Spring-water) sounds positively alarming in spite of the Scribe's special note appended to the prescription: 'IT HEALS IT!' The third remedy, however, shows more promise, and reveals once again a belief on the part of these ancient physicians in the homœopathic doctrine of like-curing-like:

ANOTHER TO DRIVE OUT HOTNESS IN THE EYES

Tallow-from-the-Jawbone-of-an-Ass

Mix in Cool Water and let the Patient put on his Temples in order that he may be healed forthwith.

CHAPTER XVII

DISEASES OF THE EAR, NOSE AND MOUTH

IN contradistinction to eye-troubles, affections of the Ears receive scant treatment. As might be expected, the chapter opens with a remedy for the Ear-that-Hears-Badly, but it is extremely doubtful if the sufferer experienced any relief from having his ears plugged with Red-lead and Resin-from-the-am-tree, even when rubbed up beforehand with Fresh Olive Oil.

For an Ear-that-Discharges-foul-smelling-Matter, an application of Incense-in-Goose-Grease ground up with Cream-from-the-Milk-of-a-Cow in various grains is recommended, but whether as poultice or injection is not altogether clear. Not that it mattered much, one is safe in asserting. Failing the above, an injection composed of Ass's Ear, Red-lead, Caraway and Olive Oil, could be squirted into the Ear. But discharging ears were as resistant to treatment in those days as in these, and detailed instructions were sometimes necessary:

ANOTHER TO TREAT THE EAR

Treat it with cooling remedies, not warm ones.