

## Cures for everything

YOU CANNOT afford, these days, to settle yourself down across the table from someone convivial and indulge yourself in one of life's great pleasures, the complaint about health. The pleasure of regaling others with the story of your mysterious skin complaint, complete with baring of flesh, is out. The mysterious discharge from parts unmentionable, the nagging cough, the is it influenza? the headache and the savouring of all their symptoms is something that must be denied. The cure bore has put a stop to it.

There was a time when a modest dose of hypochondria might be the only comfort going. You could cosset yourself with a range of fascinating symptoms, none of which deserved a visit to the doctor, but all of which were fascinating. Rashes were especially good. All skin complaints have an obliging way of being hard to diagnose instantly, apart from acne.

Better still were the complaints that went with a noise. You could fix your eye solemnly on the person opposite and come up with a raspy cough, something phlegmy, a slight wheeze.

Then there was the injury that might never heal. There was the rare disease for which no cure has yet been found. I have known whole lunch hours to fly past in this fashion.

It was harmless fun. It gave some point to living, at times, wondering



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what symptom you could wake up with the following morning. It often went with using up your statutory right to sick leave at work, when menstrual cramps were seen to be used rather too irregularly. The menstrual cycle itself was always a source of lively discussion among women. Men spent as much energy discussing symptoms of strange influenzas. Men never get the common cold; it's a point of honour with them. They get suspected pneumonia.

These days you try out such discussions at your peril. Everyone knows a cure for everything.

There are the vitamin freaks. They know just what you need to take for depression, insomnia, angry red rashes, nausea, loss of libido, infertility and paranoid schizophrenia. A handful of vitamin something will do the trick. Vitamin freaks have a way of staring you out just when you're getting really wound up describing

your symptoms, and retaliating with the miracle cure story that goes with your plight.

If you manage to be evasive too long about accepting their cure, they'll assure you that they used to suffer from your problem themselves — until they took 40 vitamin K pills a day.

There are the homeopaths. A zillion of them. They will cure you with preparations like nux vomica if you let them. They have a little white powder for all occasions, and it is infallible at curing things traditional doctors can't. Homeopaths turn their noses up at antibiotics and such 20th-century inventions. There's no point in trying to fascinate them with your allergy to penicillin. They'll load you down with white powders that have been proven to be 10 times more effective anyway.

There is the Adele Davis gang. They know that whatever's wrong with you is due to not eating something you should be eating, and recommend stewed parsley for that fascinating rash on your stomach. They sidestep you into detailed descriptions of your bowel habits, and tell you in detail how regular theirs are. What they eat each week is planned like the Meissen plan, because they are eating their way free of cancer and heart disease and acts of God.

A diet freak can take over that interesting whinge you had organised, and turn it into a eulogy about trace minerals and kelp. They know just the nauseating potion to cure your menstrual cramps.

Then there are the herbalists. Everyone is into herbs these days, and eager to recommend calendula petal douches for anything you may dream up. They have known terminal lung cancer to be cured with a dose of borage. No medical problem is too complicated for them. Even contraception problems can be solved with a plug of thyme in the right place. And so on.

There are those who own the Barefoot Doctor's Manual, and recommend needles stuck in your ear for your fascinating stomach rash. Acupuncture is as fashionable as nux vomica and thyme plugs. There are books like *The Paper Midwife* which recommend all sorts of potions for problems in home birth, and never the ambulance.

It took time, but the counter culture has now effectively cornered the market on illness. They have made it so boring to be sick that everyone is obliged to stay well. Or be bored to death.

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