Menstruation: curse or blessing?

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Cleansing or curse?
Menstruation in our lifetime has been commonly called ‘The Curse’. Our sisters in the 16th century, however, welcomed this cleansing as a fertility sign from God, through the moon that determined the tides of all that flowed on the earth. These tides included the four humorous fluids that made up each of us and determined, by balance, the health of an individual.

Ancient medical philosophers for over 1000 years understood by observation that if a woman did not bleed each month she was unlikely to conceive. In the 16th century, women were considered to be very different creatures medically from men. Women were born with more blood in their bodies, and were colder by nature than the hotter, stronger, intellectual male. Men were also considered of higher moral character than women, being stronger in every sense.

Understanding how the female body worked was subject to considerable confusion. Despite the uteric sections of the body being quite accurately described by Soranus, for some reason it was later believed that the womb was divided into seven cells. The male cells were the three on the right and the female on the left. The middle cell was for a wasted egg or to grow a hermaphrodite child.

By 1545, the widely read publication, The Birth of Mankind (believed to be published initially in Germany), clearly denied the seven-cell principle, which shortly after this time was fully accepted as a notorious mistake. The Hippocratic teachings that the male eggs lay on the right and the female on the left. The middle cell was for a wasted egg or to grow a hermaphrodite child.

By today’s standards the pharmaceutical treatments ranged from mad to dangerous, with some outstanding exceptions. The origins were early Greek and were in the polypharmaceutical tradition of Galen. Doctors would mix up a vast range of components (up to 100), some of which were not found naturally in the diet, and then the body could choose what it needed. Heat might also be applied by degrees from warm to blistering! Dr John Hall of Stratford upon Avon (born c.1575) made case notes about the treatment of his patients. He was a caring, capable, provincial doctor and much respected. His records show 60% of his patients were female and their treatments provide a fascinating and vital link for medical historians studying the period.

Reassurance features strongly, and we all know the healing benefits of confidence. No doubt some illnesses ‘disappeared’ as much as any other and no doubt menstruation ‘appeared’ in the same way.

For those not able to afford a doctor, various remedies “To bring on the Flowers” can be found in household books such as Gervase Markham’s, The English Housewife. He largely favoured herbal remedies but also included bleeding, vomits, poulticing and cupping for those who liked more medicated concoctions.

There are recipes available for decreasing and increasing blood flow, stomach cramps and cleansing after childbirth. Equally, it would not take a huge amount of intelligence to work out that some of these recipes could bring on abortion, such as the one “For the delivery of a dead child”.

Medieval menstrual matters
Arrangements for menstrual hygiene can be found clearly in the upper and rich classes. Household accounts show that there were laundresses of private linen. That linen could include menstrual cloths probably soaked in salt, washed out and hung out to dry in hot rooms over racks. I have not been able to determine if royal cloths were then sent ‘down the line’ for use by others, with fresh cloths being used each time by the royalty. Imagine how high on the list of paid informants these laundresses must have been when a marriage enquiry was underway!

Meanwhile, whilst linen was being held on fine belts under a shift for the rich, the less well off were not able to afford such cloths. The argument of using rags doesn’t apply, since poorer people were already wearing rags as clothing, and so would not have enough to spare for this purpose. I have spent some time trying to trace what might have been used instead. The Museum of Menstruation and Women’s Health website suggests the use of grass – but held in what? However, from the 13th century there is evidence of cloth being made from nettles. It is a fiddly, time-consuming process but the resultant cloth is free. The principle is that once the harness is made, it is filled with grass or sphagnum moss, which is soft, green and absorbent. Many readers will know that sphagnum moss was used to treat wounds and bedsores in the 19th century. Certainly one medieval historian told me she had seen the
use of a nettle harness and sphagnum moss in records – but where? I have been searching for 2 years now for proper evidence without success.

I decided to try an experiment and invited nettle expert, Gillian Edom, to join me in my castle in Staffordshire. She showed me how to crop mature nettles, then (rot) them in a brook, and bring the slimy nettles in and dry them in a cell. As Gillian was only with me for a weekend, she had brought nettles along in various stages and most kindly also brought a precious supply of the fibre. After a few weeks drying out, elegant brown sticks remain. Inside the sticks is nettle fibre that looks exactly like sheep’s wool. The fibre is boiled in a pan with wood ash (in a stockig). The smell of washing powder reminded one of the alkalai present – a necessary part of the preparation. At the next stage the fibre was washed in a sieve, dried and carded just like sheep’s wool.

Weaving the fibre was not an easy task. It took a local lady weaver a year in her spare time to complete the harness. She told me it was difficult because the fibres were short and broke easily, and suggested that perhaps the fibre may have had a little wool mixed in, poached from hedges. To prove the point, Nancy Simms went on and made me a Jacob’s wool harness and a silk one, both in a matter of hours (Figure 1).

I am hoping to acquire some newly grown sphagnum moss, perhaps from my own Birmingham University Botanical Gardens and, yes, I do intend to wear the harness when menstruating. The used sphagnum moss will go up to the laboratories for testing and I will report on the results. Certainly the harness is comfortable, and I have worn it all day without irritation. Meanwhile, I shall be trawling the Wellcome Library for further evidence.

Finally, for those of you surprised at how able we were so long ago, I do have a photograph of a used tampon found inside an Egyptian mummy!

Future articles
Readers interested in finding out more for themselves about the topics covered in this article should consult some of the publications listed in the Bibliography.

For those with a yearning to find out more about nettles, Gillian Edom is giving two talks at the Natural History Museum in London later this year as part of the ‘Be Nice to Nettles Week’!

The next article in the series on ‘The French Pox’ explores the arrival and impact of syphilis in English society. It also considers the role of doctors and the desperate measures taken in an attempt to control this sexual plague.

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4 Jonhas, Richard. *The Birth of Mankind* First published in English in 1540 (translated from the Latin De partu hominis, which was translated in 1532 by Christian Engelolph from a German original Der Swangern Frauwen und Hebammen Roetzgarten published in 1513 by Eucharius Rosslin).
6 Hunken, Tim. “Moss” claims to be information given as informative entertainment. It succeeds! All you probably ever wanted to know about moss and its many uses including medical available at this fascinating website (http://www.rudimentsofwisdom.com/pages/moss.htm).
7 Wellcome Library for the History and Understanding of Medicine, London, UK. Every doctor who enjoys the history of medicine should be a member.
9 Museum of Menstruation and Women’s Health website (www.mum.org). Some of the contributors are specialists and it is certainly an unusual information source. How well researched the information given is I can’t tell – yet!