

12-15-2018

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Citation Details

Schweid, Julia. "The Epic Rise and Subtle Fall of American Herbalism, Working Paper No. 10", *Portland State University Economics Working Papers*. 10. (15 March 2018) i + 15 pages.

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The Epic Rise and Subtle Fall of American Herbalism

Working Paper No. 10

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A Contribution to the *Working Papers* of the
Department of Economics, Portland State University

Submitted for: EC456, “American Economic History”
15 December 2018; i + 15 pages

Prepared for Professor John Hall

Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that we can track the development and evolution of herbalism as the initial form of medicine in American economic history. Upon colonization of North America, the indigenous people generously shared their knowledge of plant medicine with the settlers from Europe. The indigenous knowledge combined with the translation of ancient herbal texts created a synthesis of understanding and an important form of cultural exchange. People then began making attempts to standardize the medicine and its potency was compromised with the rise of the industry in patent medicine, or what I have named pseudo herbalism. It was soon revealed that harmful compounds such as cocaine and opium were previously being labeled as cure-alls and marketed under the guise of natural medicine. This created a distrust between people and their own knowing, and as the germ theory began to rise in popularity, people relinquished their self-sufficiency in terms of their health to become completely reliant on modern medical practices.

Journal of Economic Literature Classification Codes: I110, I120, I140, Z1

Key Words: Commodification, Germ Theory of Disease, Herbalism, Holistic, Indigenous, Infectious Disease, Patent Medicine, Small Pox, Socio-cultural

This inquiry seeks to establish that we can track the development and evolution of herbalism as the initial form of medicine in American economic history. Dating all the way back to prehistoric times, plants and herbs have been used as medicine throughout the entirety of the world, in some places with more prevalence than others. Although here in the United States the medical system has shifted away from using whole plants, and instead attempts to mimic certain constituents in a biochemical fashion as a form of symptomatic relief, many parts of the world still rely solely on herbal medicine to support their mental, physical, and spiritual health. Various forms of medicine employed in the United States contain an herbal component, and while these types of medicine are now classified as ‘alternative’, modern western medicine that uses pharmaceutical drugs over herbal methods did not arise until the 19th century.

Towards a History of Herbal Medicine

The history of herbal medicine is closely tied to the history and evolution of diet, as there is convergence in the medicinal use of spices with antimicrobial properties before access to modern methods of food storage and preparation. Today the United States is among the largest importer and consumer of spices, according to Kathy Kelly in “Herb and Spice History” (2017), from the year 1990-1994 an average of 530 million pounds of spices were imported into the United States,

valued at a total of \$372 million. The use of herbs as medicine dates back far beyond the written history of the world, but there is a somewhat clear, although non-linear path of development of this type of medicine in the United States. There are many records of medicinal herbs from Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, India, Greece, and Rome, and once a port for the spice trade was established, herbs and spices began flooding into Europe. Fast forward to the 16th and 17th centuries, where there was a renewed interest in botany, and a profound improvement in translation of ancient herbal texts, and this interest naturally spread to America through colonization.

Herbalism and the Indigenous

Indigenous people of North America were practicing herbalism far before Europeans began to colonize the land, but many of their remedies and modes of healing were not recorded in writing. While some of the knowledge regarding herbs and other natural healing modalities was lost when elders and medicine men and women passed away, much of the information was passed down orally and is still practiced by many people today, both native and non-native. In the oral traditions it is said that much of the knowledge about medicinal plants that the Native's developed came from observing wildlife around them. According to Marlene Adelman in "The Herbal Healing Practice of Native Americans" (2013),

the natives would watch the animals experiment with the plants and herbs to heal themselves. As the European settlers began to migrate to North America, the indigenous people were generous in sharing their knowledge of herbal medicine.

An illustrative example of this is when in the 16th century French explorer Jacques Cartier and his team became very sick from what we now know has scurvy, and 25 of the men died. Soon after, Jacques Cartier met with Dom Agaya, a native, who had previously been ill with the same disease, although he quickly regained his health. Cartier inquired about how Agaya had healed himself as he thought the illness was an undeniably fatal condition, which is when Agaya shared the Iroquois remedy of a tea containing juniper bark and needles. The French began to use this remedy and those that were still alive rapidly recovered. It becomes clear that the transfer of herbal knowledge was an important aspect of cultural exchange, quite literally it was health or illness, life or death in many of the earliest recorded interactions. Although there is a large gap in the literature regarding specifics of the herbal aspect of cultural exchange, we can infer that the colonizers relied upon the medical knowledge of the indigenous people, as they were the experts in healing, since they had no other options. This creates a unique sociocultural and economic dynamic between indigenous people and settlers, one which has not been explored in depth because of the lack of available information.

While there is a gap in the details of knowledge transfer between the natives and the settlers, there is a strong history regarding specific herbal remedies employed by the indigenous people. A key aspect of their healing practice is the innately and intimately interwoven nature of mind, body, spirit, and earth. In current times, this holistic approach to medicine remains largely ignored by western doctors. Ignoring continues even though quantitative, and data based studies suggest of an undeniable yet sometimes elusive link between physical and emotional health. The earth component of this can be interpreted as the environment that the person exists within, and if they feel connected to that environment in any way. The natives understood this connection to mean that a physical illness or disease had an equally spiritual, or in other words non-physical component to it. This concept is the foundation for how indigenous people go about treating themselves or their loved ones, with the intention for the plant to interact with the entirety of the person on a metaphysical level. Although this has been lost in mainstream medicine in the West, this idea of metaphysical roots of illness or dis-order is still very much alive in Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, and vitalist herbalism. Like herbalism, Chinese medicine and Ayurveda are ancient practices, and it becomes clear that medicine started as a holistic endeavor, and reductionist philosophy has minimized modern medicine to focus solely on the physical.

A similarity between herbalism of indigenous people and other forms of holistic medicine is the idea that the body contains a vital life force and any medicines employed should strengthen and support this life force.

Another key component of the herbalism used by indigenous people is the idea that when plants are used there is a sacred communication between the innate intelligence of the body, and the innate wisdom of the plants. They believed that the spirit of the person and the spirit of the plant interact to form a reciprocal, co-creative experience to facilitate healing. When the reductionist view of the world and mechanistic philosophy of the body began to arise, people began to question and even invalidate the intuitive nature of this kind of medicine, as it is often something that is beyond quantitative measurement when the scope is beyond the physical. While the indigenous people kept this mystery alive, others lost it, by a means of colonization of the soul.

Herbal traditions of the early United States were birthed as a synthesis of knowledge from the indigenous people and the European settlers. The translation of herbal texts into the English language and the spread of these texts to colonial America marked the initial beginning of the herbal industry. Nicolas Culpeper, an English herbalist, wrote many herbal books of his own after translating medical texts from ancient Greek and Latin. During the English Civil War, when the College of Physicians was unable to enforce their ban on the publication of

medical texts, Culpeper chose to publish his translations in vernacular English for those who could not afford the help of physicians. In the 17th century, the translation of these texts and his original books soon spread to America, where people were receptive and quickly became engaged in herbal medicine. While the indigenous people were already knowledgeable about the subject and often shared information with colonizers, the information was rarely recorded and records were not compiled until the 19th century.

Commodification of Plant Medicine

Although there was a monetization of many herbal products, there was not such a drastic industrialization of herbalism as with other industries, because industrializing this sort of medicine violates the premise of its efficacy. A common thread throughout many schools of herbalism is that the knowledge of the medicine should be a public asset, not an exclusive process only possible by large agencies and corporations. In this way, the emergence of the herbal industry was more so a collaboration between people interested in herbal medicine, and having the opportunity to discuss such practices, as in other parts of the world just a few years prior they could have been accused of witchcraft.

In the 17th century botanical remedies were often homemade and people relied upon the herbal texts that had been translated and imported, as physicians

were hard to find and often highly expensive. Although the industrialization of the herbal industry has not been of the same volume as the pharmaceutical industry, there was a period of what I will label pseudo herbalism, where people marketed combinations of plants, drugs, and alcohol as cure all formulas, an era known as patent medicine. It is important to note these medicines were not actually patented, the term originated in England and referred to a formula used to treat the royal family. Patent medicine in the United States began in the 18th century and was prominent until a regulation was passed in 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act, which required these medicines to be labeled.

Patent medications consistently contained opium, cocaine, and other potentially harmful narcotics, although people were not aware of this because there was no requirement that these ‘medicines’ be labeled. Although the formulations often contained dangerous compounds, there was no authority to expose the fraud happening, and people were dealing with ailments that were beyond the scope of what was known about medicine, so naturally they believed that these patent medicines could cure them, especially because there were extremely aggressive marketing techniques. Additionally, the options for medical help at the time were either to use patent medicine or to seek out an expensive physician who would use harsh techniques such as bloodletting to shock the body back into health. With few options for medical treatment in existence, a dichotomy developed here between

heroic medicine, characterized by bloodletting and needing a physician, and the Thomsonian system, which many people favored as an alternative to heroic medicine. Samuel Thomson is sometimes considered the father of herbalism, as his approach to medicine was botanically based and spoke out against the use of toxic heavy metals as forms of treatment. Thomson's philosophy was similar to Culpeper as he too believed that medical knowledge should be a public good, and that it cannot help people at the rate it should when it is held exclusive.

The Thomsonian system of medicine is not the same as patent medicines which started to gain popularity at around the same time. According to Hagley museum in, "History of Patent Medicine" (2011), patent medicines originated in England as proprietary medicines, were exported to America in the 18th century, and were then sold by postmen, grocers, tailors, and other local merchants. By the mid 19th century, manufacturing such products became extremely popular and even a major industry in America, what I have labeled pseudo herbalism. There are many distinct differences between patent medicine and herbal medicine, although people began to view botanical medicine as falling under the umbrella of patent medicine, because some products contained herbal components. Many people began to turn to patent medicines as a result of distrust in the medical practices of the heroic era. Patent medicines were also advertised aggressively and manipulatively, making grand claims in almanacs and newspapers. Eventually

advertising for patent medicines became a business in itself, and advertisers expanded their scope by creating medicine shows, in which salesmen would travel around and lead performative acts to sell the medicines to people. The modern manifestation of this is the infomercial, which the pharmaceutical industry often utilizes.

While sometimes there were herbal additions to the formulas, the era of patent medicine is marked by corporations like Coca-Cola and Kellogg who made absurd health claims about their products. The cases of death, drug addiction, and other serious implications that arose from the compounds began to be more widely publicized, and people started to tune into the danger and fraud of these substances. This took a long time though, as the typical newspaper relied heavily on the advertising of the patent medicines. Everything changed in 1906 when the Pure Food and Drug Act was passed, as this required all formulas to be labeled. At the same time as these methods were being exposed as fraudulent, scientific methods became more advanced and there was more widespread acceptance of the germ theory. The patent medicine era was dismissed as quackery, and unfortunately herbalism remained loosely tied to patent medicine not by practice but by perspective. With the development of the germ theory, what we now know as western medicine began to emerge.

Emergence of Western Medicine

People began to question the origin of diseases, and with new and advancing medical equipment as well as a rise in the use of the scientific method they were able to develop experiments to test their curiosities. Louis Pasteur, the founder of the germ theory, was the first to prove the existence of microorganisms, like microscopic germs and their effects on the human body. This discovery changed the course of medicine, and led to a string of bacteriological discoveries in common diseases of the time. According to Guenter B. Risse in, "History of Western Medicine from Hippocrates to Germ Theory" (1993), by the early 1900's physicians were able to diagnose the presence of specific microorganisms in the body and diagnose an infectious disease. This ultimately led to the widespread use of vaccines to eradicate diseases, which largely changed the course of the American population.

An English doctor by the name of Edward Jenner experimented and developed vaccines for creating immunity against smallpox. 18th century doctors attempted to prevent smallpox through variolation. This involves taking material from fresh human smallpox sores and inserting it into the skin of an uninfected person, although this caused people to become seriously ill and become contagious. Jenner took a slightly different approach by using the method of variolation except with cowpox sores instead of chicken pox sores, and he found

that this caused the person to develop an immune response to smallpox, and they did not become sick after being infected with smallpox post being infected with cowpox. Vaccines changed the course of history as before a great amount of the population died due to smallpox infection. The way that early vaccine developers chose to work with the immune response is much different than today, the biggest difference being that the infection, or vaccine, used to be administered through the skin or other mucous membranes, and not through the bloodstream like today. This fundamentally changes the process of the immune response and creates implications that were not present when the vaccines were first being developed.

Vaccines and antibiotics are key components of the advance of modern medicine, and as mentioned earlier, diet plays a key role in the medical system of a society. In the mid 1900's, with the advancement of chemical and pharmaceutical compounds on the rise, antibiotics were introduced into the food system by adding them to cattle feed, and feeding them to pigs and poultry, with the belief that they would gain weight faster and require less feed. This is how the modern medical industry expanded its reach into other parts of society, like the food system. As more medical schools and programs were established, there was a sharp increase in physicians, and in a very short amount of time people went from being completely self-sufficient, to completely dependent on modern medical practices. Although herbs are not prescribed or recommended by physicians, many people have

continued to rely on their herbal remedies over the years, and this trend is growing as a result of the age of information, and having access to literature about alternatives to big medicine. While herbalism did not necessarily fall, it was overshadowed by other forms of medicine, and now in the 21st century it is possible to use elements of both to live a sovereign and healthy life.

Conclusion:

This inquiry has sought to establish that in American economic history we can track the rise and fall of herbalism. Traditional herbal medicine is why Americans have been able to advance to the point we are at now, although there were serious diseases that killed many over the years, there were also many herbal remedies developed to boost ones natural immunity, fight off infection, and generally support the health of the body. However, the rise of patent medicines caused people to question the validity of herbal medicine, which is not necessarily a bad thing because the effectiveness of a plant does not depend on people's belief in it, so the people that are ready to receive the healing benefits of plants will seek them out. Also, the doubt in botanical medicine caused people to look for something different, and many amazing things have come out of modern medicine.

Today, it is quite common for people to be looking for something, like herbalism, to remind them of their sovereignty and bodily autonomy, as an effect

of widespread use of modern medicine has caused people to believe that they do not know their bodies, and that they must rely on someone else when something goes awry. While it is proven that herbs possess vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, antibacterial, antimicrobial, among many other properties, there is no standardization of herbal medicine, which prevents it from being integrated into larger health systems. This can be a good thing however, as it keeps people in their communities working together, and creating a holistic relationship with the plants and the world around them based on their own deep, ancient knowing.

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