MEDICAL PRACTICE IN OLD ILLWARRA

It has recently been reported that the blood sucking worm known as a leech, class Hirudinea, once used in medicine for reduction of a bruise for blood-letting is once again being used by some doctors for the same purpose.

My father, Alick Weston of Albion Park, used to relate how farmers’ sons in that area used to earn a few shillings by selling leeches to some of the early doctors in the Illawarra district.

The method of collecting them was to lay the hide of a freshly skinned calf, hair side up, in a mountain stream and in a few hours dozens of the repulsive things would be clinging to it.

Doctors kept them in a jar of water and would set them to work on a patient by placing a few in a pickle bottle and inverting it over the bruised area. The leech then started work, first injecting a decoagulant to thin the blood for easy ingestion and this caused the opening to continue bleeding after the engorged worm dropped off.

In my prewar tramping in the jungles of New Guinea the bare legs of my native carriers would be festooned with the things after wading through creeks. They got rid of them by touching each one with the end of a burning stick.

The smaller leeches could enter a boot via the lace eyelets and get busy on your foot quite unfelt until bloodied footwear was removed at night.

Puttees or long sox did not deter them but we found that a lather of Lifebuoy Soap smeared over the leg wear was a powerful repellant, carbolic was not to their liking as also was kerosene.

Incidentally the archaic term for a doctor was "a leech" which is indicative of the dependence of those medieval medicos on the surgical skill of those worms.

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