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LE FANU

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# A health unto Her Majesty

Queen Victoria's medicine chest, coming up for auction soon, has some surprising affinities with present-day preparations

QUEEN Victoria's frequently unamused expression could have masked a preoccupation with chilblains or — more likely — trouble with her bowels.

Her travelling medicine chest, soon to be auctioned by Christie's South Kensington, contains an array of remedies that offers a fascinating glimpse into the health obsessions of another age. Like many other Victorians, the Queen was prone to constipation and obsessed with over-the-counter laxatives; her medicine chest contains an intriguing bottle marked glycerine, which she

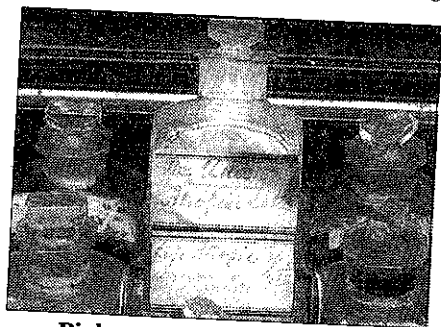
advances, there is no genuine cure for baldness.

Unsurprisingly, the chest contains chloroform. Victoria was no slouch as a medical pioneer — the present Royal Family's fascination with homeopathy stems from her interest. Faced with her eighth and last labour, she agreed to inhale chloroform vapour. Religious and moral objections to easing childbirth pains evaporated overnight and she became known as the mother of obstetric analgesia.

A bottle of camphor liniment in case of "carbolic poisoning" suggests Victoria followed Joseph Lister's antiseptic ideas which eventually won the day for safer surgery and childbirth. Carbolic acid, present in modern antiseptics such as TCP, is not only poisonous in very concentrated form, but could irritate the skin. Camphor liniment may have eased itching and stinging.

On the painkilling and tummy bug front, the medicine chest packs a powerful and potentially addictive punch, with tincture of opium for diarrhoea and bimeconate of morphia as a pain killer. Neither Victoria nor Albert seems to have indulged, except for medicinal purposes, but today all opiates are strictly supervised. However, the Victorian approach to Grand Tour tummy lingers on in J. Collis Browne's tablets, which contain tiny amounts of morphine hydrochloride. Pharmacists are cautious about selling these, and usually offer Immodium.

For neuralgia Queen Victoria carried lotion of atropine, which along with belladonna is derived from deadly nightshade (*Atropa belladonna*). Atropine is a powerful anti-spasmodic, contained today in Lomotil, prescribed sometimes for irritable bowel syndrome. Atropine is, however, dangerous in overdose, leading to disturbed heart rhythms and delirium.



Pick-me-ups fit for a queen

used for both constipation and chilblains.

Very likely she took a spoonful following a heavy repast, as glycerine has an osmotic quality drawing water to itself, thus speeding passage through the bowel. Even today it is present in laxative suppositories, though there is no suggestion that Victoria resorted to such a remedy, favoured more by the French.

Her physician, Sir James Reid, may have found it indelicate even to raise the matter. It was only after her death that he learnt she had a prolapsed womb, suggesting that he never physically examined her.

Victoria was well advised to try glycerine for chilblains. According to folklore, a paste of glycerine and honey bound together with white of egg and flour eases the fiery itch of chilblains and may even cure them. Today Zam-Buk, a medicated ointment containing several oils, and Snowfire, which contains soft paraffin plus 15 natural herbal extracts, are popular



Facing up to the facts: Teresa Stone, left, receives advice

# When the qu... is a life-or-o...

Up to 4,000 more lives a year could be saved if patients received the best treatment

A DIRECTORY published today gives women and GPs the first guide to the quality of breast-cancer units throughout Britain. It compares the breast-cancer services in more than 200 acute NHS hospitals, showing how they measure up to what surgeons say are the "key indicators" to the best chance of survival.

The guide is the result of a survey by the Cancer Relief

accepted as a "model" for quality treatment.

There, Teresa Stone was "frightened and, therefore, quite aggressive" when, at the end of a long breast-cancer clinic 12 days ago, a tumour in her right breast was proved malignant. A second, deeper, suspicious mass awaited diagnosis.

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...rhosis was not self-induced, especially as a fair proportion start drinking again.

A recent study of 20 alcoholics given a transplant at King's College Hospital in London found that after an initial phase of abstinence lasting several months, 16 were back to "regular drinking" within a year. The quan-

...TODAY, Jeanne Calment will be celebrating her 120th birthday at Arles in the South of France. As the world's longest-living person she has generated a lot of interest among gerontologists and others concerned with ageing. A couple

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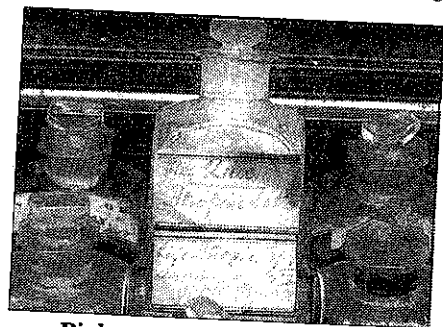
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