St Columba’s case book

Was St Columba of Iona a doctor or a saint? St Columba was an early Christian saint who founded a monastery on Iona, but his Life, published at the end of the fifth century by Adomnán, suggests that he was also one of Britain’s early GPs. Written a century after his death, the stories rely heavily on Christian symbolism as they were based on tales circulating among the monks and were written by an abbot, about an abbot. However, if you ignore the miraculous hyperbole, Book II can be read as a description of early British medicine. Columba seems to have been a widely respected GP with some knowledge of public health medicine.

He investigated two epidemics, once by identifying a point source infection from a well (anyone who drank from the well or intentionally washed his hands or feet in it was struck down—people became leprous or half blind or were afflicted) and once by attempting to treat a possible smallpox outbreak (awful sores of pus on the bodies of people and on the udders of cattle) with penicillin (bread dipped in water). Columba can be forgiven for not recognising that the virus would not respond to penicillin, which in any case was not discovered for another 13 centuries. He was also unusually to have heard of trichinosis, but he knew enough to warn of the dangers of eating undercooked pork. One impatient farmer did not wait and slaughtered a pig too soon (to avoid the risks of eating undercooked pork). One impatient farmer did not wait and slaughtered a pig too soon (to avoid the risks of eating undercooked pork). One impatient farmer did not wait and slaughtered a pig too soon (to avoid the risks of eating undercooked pork). One impatient farmer did not wait and slaughtered a pig too soon (to avoid the risks of eating undercooked pork). One impatient farmer did not wait and slaughtered a pig too soon (to avoid the risks of eating undercooked pork).

Columba successfully recommended a combination of controlled dieting (fasting) and counselling. On another occasion, he was called at night to attend a woman in labour who was suffering great pains during a difficult childbirth. Columba chose prayer or “watchful waiting.” Perhaps Columba's most interesting intervention came in cardiology. A middle aged man with type A personality (Broch’s heart was hard and unyielding) suffered a heart attack, attributed to a heavy blow from an angel, which left him struggling for breath and near to death. Columba prescribed the cardiac drug of choice, perhaps a nitrate (a white rock dipped in water, that floated miraculously on the water like an apple or a nut). The patient took the draught and completely recovered. This miracle drug healed many people and was so effective that it was kept in the royal treasury until it was used up.

Little acknowledgement of Dr Columba’s contribution to medicine remains today. A monastery on Iona still exists and is the destination for many persons seeking spiritual healing. Those requiring treatment for physical problems must travel by ferry across the Sound of Iona to Mull or await the Oban ambulance.

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We welcome articles of up to 600 words on topics such as A memorable patient, A paper that changed my practice, My most identifiable patient is referred to. We also welcome contributions for “Endpieces,” consisting of quotations of up to 80 words (but most are considerably shorter) from any source, ancient or modern, which have appealed to the reader.

Correction

Hyponatraemic seizures and excessive intake of hypotonic fluids in young children

In this Lesson of the Week by P Bhalla et al (11 December, pp 1554-7), parentheses were omitted in the calculation for the dose of hypertonic saline (p 1557). The calculation should read: dose of sodium (in mmol/l) = (0.6:body weight (kg))(desired sodium concentration (125 mmol/l) – actual sodium concentration).