

# Ancient Medicine

## The Good, The Bad And The Weird

• Moshe Holender

Modern people tend to view medical practice in the ancient world as primitive and mostly worthless, if not downright harmful. In some cases that is completely true. Other ancient treatments, though—including some really strange ones—have persisted into the modern era or have been rediscovered, and scientific tests have confirmed their usefulness.

**Learn about the 1,000-year-old eye salve from medieval England made from cow's stomach bile, wine and herbs; curing headaches by literally drilling holes in the head; pouring cane sugar into open wounds; removing sections of the tongue to cure stuttering and more. Can you guess which remedies are effective?**

**Caution: Some of the medical procedures discussed here are not for the faint of heart.**





Wisdom, mystery, power... in ancient cultures, the doctor—or medicine man—was an important, respected and even feared member of the community. Oftentimes, the position was attributed spiritual significance, with priests, shamans and “wise women” taking the role of doctors. The medical practitioner had special clothing and tools, performed rituals and uttered secret incantations. He was part magician, part showman, and part



Shaman of the Evenki people, indigenous to northern Siberia. “Shaman” is an Evenki word that was popularized throughout the world after Russian researchers described their culture.



Archie Fire Lame Deer (1935-2001), a medicine man of the Lakota people (northern central US).

lucky. He was revered as one who fought terrifying diseases and conditions that could enfeeble even the strongest person. Even today, many people view top doctors with a certain mystique, as if possessed of an almost magical power to diagnose and cure disease.

Several hundred years ago, medicine was based more on superstition and anecdotal evidence than on anything else—or so the thinking goes. Over the past several decades, though, a growing body of evidence has accumulated showing that the ancients weren’t quite as naïve or foolish as we had thought. In fact, they sometimes possessed cures that could outdo modern antibiotics and other drugs....

Of course, ancient medicine had a large number of “cures” that have been proven completely worthless and even some that are very harmful. In their desperation to fight dreaded conditions, ancient cultures made use of techniques that seem to us as laughable, frightening or totally bizarre. Learn about the most fascinating of pre-modern medical techniques, including ones that have proven very effective even today.

Disclaimer: This article may not be appropriate for the faint of heart....

## The “Hole” History of Trepanning

It is humanity’s oldest known form of surgery. It also sounds like a really extreme way to treat a headache.

Many human skulls, from the dawn of history, have been found with a curious feature: They have holes in them. Archaeologists believe that this was done on purpose by ancient cultures as a form of medical therapy. It might sound startling at first, but we trust modern brain surgeons to do exactly the same thing every day—to use a sleeker, more precise and advanced version of a power drill or saw to remove parts of the skull. Of course, we trust that they are working with a much broader knowledge base than your typical shaman or witch doctor. Unfortunately, for the ancients, those



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