

THE USE OF EPSOM SALTS, HISTORICALLY CONSIDERED

BY COLONEL R. D. RUDOLF,

Professor of Therapeutics in the University of Toronto

THAT there is nothing new under the sun is a common saying, and never was this truer than in regard to the use of that old medicinal friend, magnesium sulphate. This drug has, of course, been used internally as a mild hydragogue for many generations, but until recently, it would appear from modern literature, its external employment had not been thought of. Thus Dr. N. H. Choksy wrote in *The Lancet* of February 4th, 1911, "that the common and homely drug known as 'Epsom Salts' possessed any other property save the one usually associated with it was scarcely known up to within three years ago. The anæsthetic effects resulting from its subcutaneous application, however, induced Dr. Henry Tucker, of Philadelphia General Hospital, to apply it for the relief of pain in local inflammatory conditions, with rather surprising results. For apart from the relief of pain and discomfort, it was found that it controlled and eventually led to the cure of the inflammatory process. Numerous observations in gonorrhœal epididymitis and orchitis, gonorrhœal rheumatism, acute articular rheumatism, neuritis, etc., gave equally satisfactory results."

And Dr. Tucker himself, in the *Therapeutic Gazette* of April, 1907, and again in that of June, 1908, elaborates this external use of the drug and gives details as to its employment. Thus, a saturated solution should be applied to the inflamed part, 15 to 20 layers of ordinary gauze being constantly kept wet with it. The gauze should not be removed for twenty-four hours and the parts then washed and the dressing reapplied. There is found to be marked bleaching of the surface, which is not followed by any deleterious effects. It causes numbness and tingling in the hands of the attendants, which may last for twenty-four hours.

The external use of magnesium sulphate thus became established and since then has been much used and to my mind bene-

ficially used in various superficial inflammatory conditions, especially, perhaps, erysipelas. But it can now be shown that this external use of the remedy is only an echo of the very ancient, in fact the most ancient, use of the salt. During the first years after the discovery of these waters they were only used externally, and it remained for the third Lord Dudley North to suggest that this all-healing drug might also be used internally with benefit. As is commonly known, the spring was discovered at Epsom, by a farmer called Henry Wickes, or Wicker, in the dry summer of 1618. This man happened to find on the Epsom Common a small hole containing water. He dug it larger and then brought his thirsty cattle to drink there, but the beasts would have none of it. This led to much talking and further examination of the well, and then someone suggested that it might be a medicinal water, and soon the local people began to use it as such in the bathing of various open sores and painful affections. This was the only use that was made of the well for years, until, indeed, Lord Dudley North, who lived somewhere near, began to take the waters as a medicine. In 1645 he published a book, called "The Forest of Varieties", and in it he claims to have been the first to have made known "the virtues of both the Epsom and the Tonbridge waters to the King's sick subjects, the journey to the German spas being too expensive and inconvenient to sick persons, and great sums of money being thereby carried out of the Kingdom." According to Nehemiah Crew, also, physician and secretary to the Royal Society, who wrote a treatise in 1695 on "*The bitter cathartic salt in the Epsom waters*", which book is in the library of the Royal Society of Medicine, where I had the chance of seeing it, Lord North was the first to take the waters as a medicine. He had been in the habit of visiting the German spas, as he "laboured under a melancholy disposition." He used it with success and regarded it "as medicine sent from Heaven." By 1688, according to Gordon Home in his "Epsom, its History and Surroundings", "it was a common occurrence for doctors to order a visit to Epsom, for in the "Domestic State Papers" of June 29th, in that year, we read: "Chatham Dockyard. John Owen to Pepys. I beg leave of absence for twelve days, being afflicted with _____ and advised to drink Epsom waters." Soon all the fashionable world was flocking to Epsom, and they continued to do so until in 1753 that popular physician, Dr. Richard Russel, introduced sea-bathing. The diversion in this direction was fatal to Epsom. Yet the Epsom well is still there, now surrounded

by fruit trees, and the water still retains its original qualities. But where are the hosts of fashionable and more humble people who used to throng the London road, riding, driving, walking or being carried to the famous well?

A great Canadian military convalescent hospital, with its four thousand patients, is now nearby, and no doubt much "mag. sulph." is used in assisting these poor fellows back to health, but it is a salt made from *dolomite* or *kieserite* that is given, rather than the original waters from the adjacent well. And this is only used internally, unless, indeed, the medical officers have been reading rather recent medical literature and are applying what they, from this, believe to be the new external method, or unless, indeed, they happen to be versed in medical history and hence know that they are only then again employing what was the original method of using this healing solution in the very place where they are now practising their art.

IN accordance with an Act passed last August to amend the Newfoundland Prohibition Act, a board of liquor control, consisting of three members has been appointed by the Newfoundland government. The powers of the Board include the supervision of the administration of the Act, the framing of rules and regulations for the purpose of carrying out its provisions, and the limitation of the quantity of intoxicants supplied to any one person.