

Modern Hospitals Try Medicine Men's Music

By EMILY C. DAVIS

Healing songs of the old Indian medicine man—can they do anything for diseased minds and bodies of white men?

It seems a far cry from the clean white stillness of the up-to-date hospital to the painted medicine man decked out in his beads and rattles, singing a chant-like melody in the tent of a wounded brave. But it is sometimes discovered that ancient and primitive physicians had a kernel of true knowledge concealed in their pageantry of rites and charms and magic potions.

In recent years, doctors have rediscovered the health-giving properties of sunlight, which Greek doctors of the fourth century B. C. prescribed for their patients.

The importance of keeping a sick man from becoming depressed and frightened over his condition has lately been stressed in scientific papers read at meetings of doctors, following somewhat after the pattern set down by a thirteenth century physician, Henri de Mondeville:

"Keep up your patient's spirits," wrote de Mondeville, "by music of viols and ten-stringed psaltery, or by forged letters describing the death of his enemies, or by telling him that he has been elected to a bishopric, if a churchman."

It must be added that the modern physician does not advocate the use of faked stories to put the patient into a favorable frame of mind for recovery. But the medieval doctor had a twentieth century idea, that emotion may play a strategic part for good or bad in a battle with disease.

And now, the primitive Indian medicine man may have a contribution to make to modern medicine. At least, the possibility is being investigated.

Medicine Men Knew Symptoms

The idea seems less fantastic when the character of Indian medicine songs is recalled. Miss Frances Densmore, of the Bureau of American Ethnology, who during the past twenty years has lived on many Indian reservations, collecting music of primitive singers, says that the medicine man was not just a wild whooping savage. The medicine man was observant, and he had technique. He did not understand diseases, but he knew that certain symptoms in a patient's appearance were good and other symptoms

were bad. He concluded by trial and effect that certain remedies and methods of procedure produced the desired improvement in the patient.

The old Indian doctors were called in to treat people who were very ill, Miss Densmore explains, for the Indians had a strong hold on life and did not give up easily. Thus, music was used by them, not in mild "nervous" ailments, but in extremes of human suffering, cases that a doctor or surgeon would call major cases.

The songs which the medicine man used came to him in psychic dreams and were reserved for the express purpose of treating a type of sickness. The way in which the songs were acquired gave them an atmosphere of authority, and the medicine man sang them with great faith in their effectiveness. The confidence of the Indian physician in his ability to cure was intended to impress the sick person and make him feel that he was going to get well.

"A Yuma medicine man told me that he would not let people cry in the room while he sang," Miss Densmore says. "Any one who came into the room was to go about naturally and not depress the patient."

Songs Are Soothing

As for the medicine songs themselves, Miss Densmore has found that the majority are of the soothing, quiet, but reassuring type. The rhythm was the important thing, not any beauty

of melody, though some of the songs have that too.

It is because of these strange, vibrant rhythms that the Indian music has been tested out in a preliminary experiment with mental patients. These first tests were made in the Manhattan State Hospital in New York City. They were conducted at the suggestion of Mr. Willem Van de Wall, of the Bureau of Mental Health, of Pennsylvania, who has for some years been using music in various ways in mental hospitals.

Two songs, both from Miss Densmore's collection, were presented to patients in this hospital. The first was a melody with a soothing rhythm used in treating headache by a San Blas medicine man, one of the so-called White Indian tribe of Panama. This was sung in the New York hospital just as the Indian had sung it for Miss Densmore's phonograph record, except that his words were put into English:

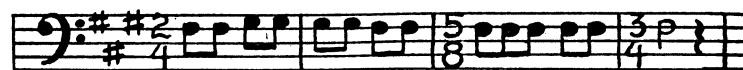
"I bring sweet-smelling flowers and put them into water,
I dip a cloth in the water and put it around your head,
Then I bring a comb, part your hair smoothly, and make it pretty.
Every one comes to see you get better.
And I tell you that you will never be cold again.
Go to sleep and dream of many

(Just turn the page)

— CHIPPEWA SONG —



— SAN BLAS SONG —



SAMPLES OF INDIAN MEDICINE tried for the first time on the white man.

Hospitals Try Music

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animals, mountain-lions and sea-lions,

You will talk with them and understand what they say.

When you wake you will be a doctor, like me."

Dr. Geoffrey C. H. Burns, of the hospital staff, who made the tests, states:

"In regard to the headache music, there is no doubt that this has a definite effect. The effect is that of rather intense and somewhat bizarre vibrations, which are transmitted to the patient. Certainly, in such cases of headache, due to stasis or congestion, this seems to have a beneficial effect. The effect, however, is rather temporary, and at present I am unable to make positive statements."

Song By Sick Man

The other song was an unusual piece of music, sung by an old Chippewa Indian who was bedridden. Ordinarily, Miss Densmore explains, the medicine man sings to help the patient. But in this instance a Chippewa medicine man sent an old Indian invalid a drum with the message that he was to play on it. The Indian worked out a cheerful bit of rhythm, which he played over and over again, and in time, Miss Densmore was assured, he got well.

The song which this Indian composed for himself is unique in that it has a distinctly stimulating effect, somewhat like that of a softly played march, with its snap and precision. After hearing it, the collector looked over her files of 1,600 songs and could find no other medicine song with this stimulating quality. All the rest were quieting rather than stirring.

This song was tried out by Dr. Burns on 20 mental patients of a depressed or suicidal type. These patients are so shut-in to themselves that it is hard to find anything to interest or arouse them from their apathy.

Tried On Insane

The twenty patients were seated comfortably around a room, knowing nothing about the music or its use. Then the Chippewa melody, which had been arranged for strings and flute by Carl Busch, was played by a small orchestra. After an interval it was played again, the whole process taking about twenty minutes.

During four weeks this experiment was repeated a number of times with the same group of mental cases.

That the music had a decided influence there is no doubt, says Dr.



AN INDIAN MEDICINE MAN, writing a prescription

Burns. None of these dull depressed patients remained stolid. Three were aroused so that they talked rather freely, which they had not done before. Five patients were moved to tears, three on the first day, the other two on the third day. But even this reaction is considered favorable in patients who go on from day to day without expressing emotion in any visible form. When once they let themselves go even a little, they are more likely to respond to other sensations and other situations. Two of the patients refused to sit in after the second session, finding the music too distressing. The other cases showed slighter effects, though beneficial ones.

Dr. Burns points out that the tests were not made with scientific precision, and that the results are tentative.

He says: "Certain facts were noted and are of sufficient value to warrant further investigation along this line."

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