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Homeopathy, oral rehydration and cholera

In this very interesting article¹, it is stated that oral rehydration was unknown until 1960. This is untrue – it was ignored, not unknown.

O'Shaughnessy, in his 1832 'Report on the Chemical Pathology of Malignant Cholera'², not only correctly advocated intravenous electrolyte solutions for severe cases but also, in milder cases, expected 'much benefit from the frequently repeated use of the neutral salts by mouth . . . dissolved in large quantities of tepid water'. The fact that his advice was disregarded for over 100 years will have caused an enormous, tragic, avoidable loss of life.

Declarations

Competing interests: None declared.

References

1. Dean ME. Selective suppression by the medical establishment of unwelcome research findings: the cholera treatment evaluation by the General Board of Health, London 1854. *J R Soc Med* 2016; 109: 200–205.
2. O'Shaughnessy WB. *Report on the Chemical Pathology of Malignant Cholera*. London: S. Highley, 1832.

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Homeopathy, oral rehydration and cholera: author's reply

Many thanks to Alastair Michell for drawing attention to O'Shaughnessy's 1832 suggestion that mild cholera could be treated with salts in solution

taken orally.¹ It is true that the statement at the beginning of the article is inappropriately more definite than it should have been. I meant (and should have written), 'historians tell us' not 'history tells us', and I'm sorry for any misunderstanding this might cause.

The statement later in the article, 'oral rehydration therapy with salt and sugar, believed to have been first used in 1960', reflects current thinking. Experiments in the 1940s and 1950s showed that sugar is needed for uptake of electrolytes given parenterally, and this was found later to be true of oral administration. Until the late 1980s, the name ORT was reserved exclusively to WHO- and UNICEF-supplied packs containing glucose as well as salts. Early oral rehydration attempts may not have worked well in the absence of sugar, which could partly explain why it was generally ignored after the 1830s. I surmised that if Drysdale had any success in the 1849 epidemic in Liverpool, it might have been because he used whey, which contains lactose as well as potassium and sodium salts.²

The text in the James Lind Library will be modified appropriately after looking at O'Shaughnessy and will reference Michell's letter.

Declarations

Competing interests: None declared.

References

1. O'Shaughnessy WB. *Report on the Chemical Pathology of Malignant Cholera*. London: S. Highley, 1832.
2. Drysdale JJ. Analysis of one hundred and seventy-five cases of cholera treated at Liverpool, in the autumn of 1849 (ii) Treatment. *Br J Homoeopathy* 1850; 8: 145–165.

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