

IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE AREA? (Cont.)

After the first quarter of the 1800s many schools of medicine were founded in the mid west; and many floundered into oblivion after teetering on the brink of insolvency for a few years. Compatible facilities, teachers, research equipment, etc., all had to be reimbursed by the tuition paid or the in-kind contribution of the student. Add to that the cost of room and board and one is amazed that there were so many in the medical profession.

As the seminal 'medical schools' proliferated, it was realized that a study of the human body would have to be a necessary part of learning how to restore health to a patient. Why did a healed bone often result in a crooked limb? Why did a break in the skin result in a frequently fatal infection? Was there a connection between drinking water from a stream in the meadow where the cattle were grazing and the high, incapacitating fever? Why did formerly healthy pioneers develop the 'ague'?

The lack of understanding of how the human body works, the paucity of the understanding of the complexity of diseases, necessary sanitation, etc. all conspired to make it possible to promote a mélange of cures. (the patient of today will also attempt any cure when desperate.) A medley of 'irregulars' and 'quacks' proliferated. There were those healers who promoted the use of steam systems, roots, herbs, water cures, the reading of the bumps on the skull, Indian cures, eclecticism, the inclusion of religion and morality with medical research - all made for a countless variety of possible cures for the Michigan pioneer. The inclusion of calomel (mercurous chloride), alcohol, human waste, blood letting, etc., in the little black bag their doctor carried makes one marvel that any of the pioneers survived and were able to do the work of settling the area. Small wonder that "Dr. Chases' Receipts" sold over 4,000,000 copies. Similar health care books would be found next to the bible in the home library.

Some medical instructors realized that to learn how the human body was constructed might reveal some clues. To accomplish this the dissection of corpses presented the only answer. Even today there is a natural aversion to the dissection of the human body. It is not difficult to imagine the terror, superstition and fear of people 150 years ago to that idea. It was not easy to sustain a dependable stock of cadavers. Often inventory was maintained by the use of professional body suppliers who not occasionally visited the local Potter's Field under cover of darkness. Knowledge of this practice was rather widespread, all of which added to the mistrust the pioneer had of the medical profession. The length of time a student spent at his studies varied with the school attended. Then, as now, 'diploma mills' were flourishing. (By Marieanna Bair. To be continued. Anyone with information regarding the subject matter of these articles is urged to contact her. 229-6402)

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