

Illness and Healthcare in Nineteenth-Century Strasburg Township, Pennsylvania

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The Funck Family Journal provides important details about contemporary understandings of illness in early post-colonial Pennsylvania. Remedies are listed for specific diseases, indicating that diseases were seen as specific, treatable entities. The remedies are relatively simple, and utilize readily available ingredients, suggesting use by lay and/or family members. This manuscript illustrates the shift toward a rationalist approach to medicine, with limited reference to occult or lunar forces. The Funck manuscript could serve as the basis for an extended study of the development of folk and professional medicine in colonial Pennsylvania.

The Funck Family Journal provides a fascinating contemporary perspective on health and illness in nineteenth-century Pennsylvania. This journal is a handwritten book used as a ledger and receipt book, apparently by members of the John Funck family. The majority of the manuscript is devoted to recipes for “Cures for man & beast” (Funck, 1802, n.p.). This manuscript reflects a particular approach to medicine and healthcare. The contents are a curious mixture of home remedies, folklore, and herbals, demonstrating the shifting, heterogeneous nature of medical practice in the early post-colonial period. The type and range of remedies appear to be typical for the period and place (cf. Burkhardt, 1982).

This manuscript provides important details about contemporary understandings of illness in Pennsylvania. There are remedies specifically for “Carolina disease” (in oxen), for worms, consumption, “An Imperceptible Swinnay”, an old ulcer, “for a weakness”, “Rheumatice”, “the fluttering of the heart”, pleurisy, gravel, a cough, a cow who has eaten too much, “Drobsy”, flux, cancer (on the skin or a visible tumor), fever, a cold, and burns. It is significant that the remedies are listed for specific diseases, showing that the author recognized diseases as specific, treatable entities which would progress and respond similarly in all patients.

The Funck manuscript demonstrates the range of remedies used to treat illnesses in the immediate post-colonial era in Pennsylvania. As noted above, the remedies presented here are relatively simple, and typically utilize readily available ingredients, which suggests that they are designed for use at home by lay and/or family members. The use of herbal decoctions made by placing fresh or dried herbs in alcohol parallels those used in alternative and integrative medicine today. The Funck manuscript references

lavender, camphor, hyssop, sage, saffron, nutmeg, wild cherry bark, white oak bark, dogwood bark, rue, yarrow, ragweed, garlic, St. Johns Wort, curcumin, cloves, mustard, and ginger. Each of these is still a recognized herbal remedy, though not always for the same purposes that are recommended in the manuscript.

In the context of the history of medicine, this manuscript illustrates the shift toward a rationalist approach to medicine, where disease is seen as a predictable process which is reliably treatable without reference to occult forces. This is demonstrated by the way remedies are organized; most remedies are positioned as being efficacious for a particular disease or condition without reference to phases of the moon or other natural cycles.

One page of the manuscript has a list “of books,” presumably a listing of medical texts which was recommended to the writer for a home reference library. The inclusion of a list of medical texts shows a recognition of medicine as a scientific field, one in which researchers and practitioners might develop specialized knowledge which could be applied by others. However, since this library was apparently intended for lay practitioners, there seems to have been a sense that effective treatment could be learned by anyone and was not limited to licensed professionals.

In conclusion, *The Funck Family Journal* represents a valuable source of information on life in the early post-colonial era in rural Pennsylvania. The extensive litany of home remedies provides insight into the understandings and practices of medical care in one family in a specific period of time. The author plans to combine this manuscript with other sources—contemporary and modern—as the basis for a comprehensive look at healthcare in the Pennsylvania German communities from the colonial era into the present day.

References

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Burkhardt, Larry Lee. (1982). *The Good Fight: Medicine in Colonial Pennsylvania 1681—1765*. Dissertation. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International.