

Heavy metals, herbs and hope: Medical care of female convicts while on assignment.

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Let's imagine that it's 1831 in Hobart Town. This is a time when female convicts were sent out on assignment. Domestic help was hard to come by and there was a real reluctance on the part of the free settlers to send away their servants to be punished for breaches of good behaviour. Reports and newspaper articles indicate that the settlers felt it was the mistress of the house, not the servant, who was being punished.

The convicts assigned as domestic staff were expected to behave themselves, work hard and be respectful at all times when on assignment. Illness was common, so was malingering. It's not surprising that they would have fallen ill at some point while on assignment, either by bad luck, bad management or by their own hand. Let's have a look and see how things went for one female convict. We'll call her Mary.

This is what Mary may well have looked like, pretty tired, overworked, underfed. She was sent out on assignment to the house of a farmer near Colebrook, and her mistress was not a kind and friendly woman, having threatened to split her head open on more than one occasion. The mistress of the house was having troubles of her own and probably didn't appreciate Mary's lack of willingness to work.

Mary's also had enough of the rough and rude treatment from her mistress so she decides to bung on a sickie in the morning. Just before supper Mary sneaks out the back to the workshop and nicks a piece of copper pipe, slips it in her pocket and overnight spends a fair bit of time sucking on the pipe.

In the morning, Mary's tongue is a sickly blue colour, her stomach is upset and she doesn't get up to start work. The mistress turns up, sees the state of Mary and her first recourse is to check to see if Mary really is sick.

For the Mistress of the house, it was easy to decide if a convict woman on assignment was really sick or not. The standard procedure was to first administer them with a purgative. This was known to be commonly used in the Female Factory before a woman was placed in the cells of Crime Class.

Generally Ipecac was used, but if this was unavailable, the patient would receive either a large dose of castor oil, rhubarb or milk of magnesia. If it was available, they used calomel, which is a form of mercuric chloride. So the mistress decides to give Mary a treatment.

The Mistress has a couple of choices - to make Mary throw up or give her the runs. She decides on both. So she makes Mary take a liberal - and strong - dose of Sassafras - growing up here on Mt Wellington. The dried bark was used in low doses is a pleasant tea or in stronger form as an aggressive purgative.

The mistress then follows an hour or so later that with a small glass of ipecac. The vomiting and diarrhoea were induced in order to rid the body of excess bile and remove the poisons from the body thereby restoring balance.

If Mary really did have something wrong with her, then there is a good chance that the remedies already given could make the condition worse. In Mary's case this initial medical treatment hasn't work well for her. As you can imagine, Mary isn't feeling too well right now. She is looking really ill, and is moaning and sweating on her bed.

The mistress is watching to see if Mary recovers from her purging ordeal. The Mistress figures that, if Mary is just trying to be a malingerer, she won't try that trick again.

But as Mary still looks really sick then the mistress is out of options and has to send for the physician, although this is an expensive undertaking. But everyone knew that convicts were human capital, valuable commodities for the government. They had to take care of the government's assets.

So the physician is called for, he has a chat with the mistress and decides that Mary has an inflamed system and prescribes successive doses of calomel in order to reduce the excitement of the blood. The calomel – mercuric chloride - is administered to Mary until the flow of saliva was constant. As you can guess, Mary isn't feeling much better.

If the patient was still displaying symptoms after this treatment it was generally assumed that there was a serious illness present and further treatment would be required. The physician returns the next day and has a chat with Mary who has nothing nice to say about her mistress or the doctor, so he decides that she obviously she has too much of a fiery temperament.

Some of the items the doctor had at his disposal were heavy metals, such as mercuric chloride, iodine powder, arsenic, opium grains, and leeches. The doctor decides that what our Mary needs right now is to have her ill humours bled from her.

Bleeding was popular, as it was easy and very impressive. It was usually the initial treatment administered generally by the physician. Bleeding was believed to release the bad blood which contained the disease. The amount of blood let, and the frequency, was dependant on the mood of the physician. A moderate amount was 350ml, which is the amount you would normally donate at Red Cross. A heavy letting was 600ml – nearly double what the Red Cross asks for.

Blood letting was used to treat all sorts of inflammations, sore eyes, throat or inflamed lungs. On the list for bleeding were heart conditions, indigestion, feeling liverish, piles, dysentery and any type of contagious fever such as typhoid, yellow fever and typhus.

This was an impressive treatment, and the easiest method was to apply a leech. They would first wash and shave the skin, and a leech was placed in a thin tube. A drop of milk was placed over the area of the vein and the tube was tipped up onto the spot. Down the leech went and got on with its job.

Once the leech was deemed to be fat enough, salt was sprinkled on it, the leech would let go and be collected back into a dish for later use.

Unsurprisingly, Mary is laying there, feeling dreadful, and has developed a high fever. She is sweating, is flushed and can't keep anything down.

If the leeches weren't available, a more messy process was to cut the patient's vein with a sharp implement. If the blood flow from the patient started to slow down it was generally because the bloodletting had reduce their blood pressure. Cupping would then be used. Into a small glass cup would be poured a little bit of alcohol which would be lit and then tipped straight onto the cut site. This would create a vacuum and allow the blood to flow freely again.

Unsurprisingly, Mary is laying there, feeling dreadful, and has developed a high fever. She is sweating, is flushed and can't keep anything down. They believed that it was better to give some treatment than none at all. The physician decides that as Mary can't tolerate drinking any more medicine, he will administer a cure through inhalation.

It was believed that if the patient was to unwell to consume the substance, then it could be administered by inhalation. These were known to be deadly substances, and were administered on the premise that if a small amount of it could create a new illness, the other, more serious illness would leave the body.

They would make inhalations with opium, iodine, mercuric chloride, lead, tobacco, arsenic and various dried plants such as nightshade, belladonna, digitalis, lobelia, and dogbane. The physician pulls a few of these from his bag, lights the burner and wafts the smoke into Mary's face, and waits for the previous ailment to leave. It doesn't.

Mary is really unwell now, and is so thirsty, she is begging for a drink of water.

This is the saddest bit of all. It was against the theory of current treatment to allow the feverish patients any water, either by drinks or by cool cloths. As a result, many died of dehydration.

The physician observes that Mary is fully feverish now, and approaching death. All treatment is stopped as it is now considered to be in the hands of their god. All they can do now is hope that the end will be swift and merciful. The doctor leaves the bedside of poor old Mary, and gives the Mistress and the Farmer a chance to say their last goodbyes.

By now, the Mistress sees how serious things are for Mary, and takes pity on her. She grants Mary her dying wish for a drink of water. Sick, dehydrated Mary gulps it down, glass after glass, as the Mistress can't deny her anything now.

To the amazement of the Farmer and his wife, Mary starts to look a bit better. It's a miracle! She is less feverish, drinking more water, and is no longer moaning and thrashing about.

More water, and now Mary sleeps. She sleeps for two whole days, and wakes feeling a great deal revived, finding a more pleasant Mistress tending to her on her sick bed. Mary decides that she will play this out for all it's worth, and takes more than two weeks before she admits to feeling well enough to leave her room. In that time she has been eating well, was issued with better than normal rations, and was enjoying the attention and drama of having had a near death experience.

Mary also has a change of heart and decides to not pretend to be sick again, for a while at least.