Internal and External Antisepsis

In the modern history of the biologic sciences and particularly in medicine, antiseptics and germicides have played such unanticipated parts and have been responsible for so much which is good that they have furnished words to conjure with. Every force that can be enlisted against baneful bacteria is promptly welcomed; but there are no “royal roads” to success in the warfare against these invisible foes, just as there are no panaceas with which every human ailment can be relieved. Surgeons of the present day have seen the pendulum of operative practice swing between antisepsis and asepsis without discovering the ultimate ideal of a universally applicable scheme of procedure. Only a few years ago, physicians were greatly exercised by the hope of finding a satisfactory intestinal antiseptic. Naturally the possibility of being able to rid the alimentary tract of its undesirable microbiotic invaders aroused widespread interest. Despite the numerous efforts to demonstrate the efficacy of this or that chemical agent or drug as a gastro-intestinal antiseptic, the outcome has been that the supposed benefits were due to catharsis in most instances rather than to any real effect upon the bacteria in situ. The emptying of the bowel is, in truth, probably the most successful mode of decreasing its bacterial flora, according to present-day knowledge.

An analogous story appears to apply to attempts to disinfect the outside of the body with alleged antiseptic products. For a long time the claims of “healing,” “antiseptic” or “germicidal” soaps have been flaunted before the laity as well as the medical profession. Thanks to the efforts of Dr. Norton, working at the University of Chicago under the auspices of the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry of the American Medical Association, the facts about “antiseptic” soaps have once more been presented in a true light. He has demonstrated that in any event, the cleansing properties of a soap, such as the green soap used in hospitals or even ordinary toilet soaps, are more important than any added antiseptic or germicidal constituent. According to Norton’s demonstrations, which confirm previous experiments, sterile hands are not obtained in the ordinary process of hand washing. Large numbers of bacteria are removed thereby, but more were actually found to be removed by ordinary soaps than by the specially advocated brands. The presence of antiseptic chemicals, such as mercury salts, is likely to interfere with the production of a good lather, on which much of the detergent potency depends. Furthermore, soap remaining on the hands after washing does not appear to have a germicidal potency.

Let us by all means get rid of bacteria on polluted hands, which have been incriminated seriously of late in connection with the spread of disease; but let us also learn to avoid a false sense of security which some labels foster. If the public is interested in “buttermilk” soap or “oatmeal” soap, both of which are chemical impossibilities even though they have been advertising actualities, no harm is done except, perhaps, to the pocketbook. But the words “antiseptic” and “germicidal” are too close to the sacred domain of hygiene and public health to be allowed a promiscuous use.

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