

Put a frog in your mouth: toothache ‘cures’ from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Ireland.

Dr Carol Barron
Assistant Professor, School of Nursing and Human Science
Dublin City University. Dublin. Ireland

Dr Tiziana Soverino
Research assistant, School of Nursing and Human Science
Dublin City University. Dublin. Ireland

Correspondence
Dr. Carol Barron
Email: carol.barron@dcu.ie
Tel: 003531 7007928

Publication details: *Journal of the History of Dentistry*. Vol. 66, No. 1 Spring 2018 pg 14- 24

Abstract

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, toothache must have been a common complaint in Ireland, to judge from the number of toothache ‘cures’ reported as part of The Schools’ Collection (SC) or ‘Bailiúchán na Scol’, a folklore-collecting scheme that was undertaken in the Irish Republic in 1937 and 1938, and upon which this article is based. These cures range from quasi-medical treatments, such as packing the affected tooth with tobacco, to more folkloric, or magico-religious cures, such as licking a frog or pulling out a tooth from a corpse, as well as herbal and mineral remedies.

Keywords: Dental treatments, folklore, minerals, magico-religious, plants

Introduction

The WHO ¹ acknowledges that traditional or folk medicine has a long history globally in health maintenance, disease prevention and treatment. Numerous countries have their own traditional or


indigenous forms of healing, which are clearly embedded in their culture and history. The WHO defines traditional medicine as;

the sum total of the knowledge, skill, and practices based on the theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness (p. 15)

This paper focuses on the traditional toothache ‘cures’ from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland. The material used for this analysis comes from The Schools’ Collection, undertaken in the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland between 1937-8. Of the fifty-five topics for which children were invited to collect pertinent material from their relatives and neighbors, local cures and Holy wells were the focus of this research. The Schools’ Collection was one of the largest collections of medical folklore in Europe and included a wide variety of cures for toothache. The term ‘cure’ was used overwhelmingly within the collection to describe a medical folklore remedy, and was thus adopted throughout this paper. Before analysing the cures, it is worth briefly examining the history of dentistry in Ireland, for context in which to situate this material.

Dentistry as a profession dates from the late nineteenth century in Ireland. The first Dentists’ Act was in 1878, the First Dentists’ Register in 1879 and from 1904 onwards, degrees in dentistry were offered at universities in Dublin, the capital of Ireland ². However, interest in improving dental care can be dated much earlier in the country. One of the earliest pamphlets was, *‘The Operator for the Teeth, Shewing How to Preserve the Teeth and Gums from All the Accidents They Are Subject To’*, published in Dublin in 1686 by an English gentleman named Charles Allen. James Kelly, in his examination of dental practice in eighteenth-century Ireland, claimed that Charles Allens’ presence in Dublin at the time suggested he was an itinerant dental practitioner who used his publication to attract clients ³. Similarly, just a few decades later, Samuel Steel was an early licensed *surgeon and operator of the teeth* ⁴, based in Dublin, who knew the importance of advertising to market his practice. His advertisement in *Dublin Weekly Journal* of 27th August 1727 advised that amongst his many talents in dentistry, he could *‘give[s] ease to the toothache and often perfectly cures them without drawing’* ⁴.

Figure.1 Samuel Steel's advertisement in *Dublin Weekly Journal*, 27th August 1727.



A M U E L S T E E L Surgeon,
and Opera. or for the Teeth, living
on Ormond Key, opposite the
Custom House, Dublin, whose Ex-
perience in drawing Teeth is ve-
ry well known He gives ease to
the Tooth Ach, and often per-
fectly cures them without Draws
ing, cleans Teeth, be they never so foul, with Di-
rections how to preserve them. He makes artificial
Teeth so neat, that they cannot be discovered from
natural ones, and as useful to eat with as others ;
for by a New Experiment, they may be worn several
Years, without being taken out of the Mouth, nor
is it any trouble to the Person that has them, and
much sweeter and cleaner than the former Method of
tying them with Silk-strings. N. B. He has the most ex-
cellent Dentifrice which is the safest Composition for
cleaning and scowering the Teeth, &c.

Courtesy of the National Library of
Ireland

Toothache cures and medical folklore

Folklorist Don Yoder ⁵ submitted there are two varieties of folk medicine: firstly, natural folk medicine which “*represents one of man’s earliest reactions to his natural environment, and involves the seeking of cures for his ills in the herbs, plants, minerals, and animal substances of nature*” and secondly, magico-religious cures, which he defined as the “*attempts to use charms, holy words, and holy actions to cure disease*” (1972, p. 192). Within all the folk ‘cures’ from The Schools’ Collection, each fell into one or other of these two broad groups; however, there was significant blending between them. The magico-religious cures were subdivided into sympathetic magic, religious and Holy wells and finally healers. They included all cures involving the use of frogs, the use of bones and teeth from animals and corpses, as well as clay from burial sites. Toothache cures calling upon magico-religious beliefs were common in Ireland, but also in an international context, as noted by Howell Granger ⁶. Sympathetic magic assumes objects act on each other at a distance ⁷ and it operates according to two principles: first, the idea that like produces like, or that an effect resembles its cause, known as homeopathic

magic; second, the idea that things that have been in contact continue to act on each other long after the physical contact has been severed, known as contagious magic ⁷.

Methodology

As mentioned, this article draws on a rich resource, The Schools' Collection, which is part of the National Folklore Collection (NFC). In 1937 and 1938, a folklore-collecting scheme was undertaken in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. Pupils aged between ten and fourteen were asked to record folklore from their local area, with the aid of a small booklet containing guidelines titled *Irish Folklore and Tradition*, written ⁸ by Seán Ó Súilleabháin, the Irish Folklore Commission's archivist. The result was The Schools' Collection ('Bailiúchán na Scol'); nearly half a million manuscript pages. The material was recorded in both Irish and English, first into the children's copybooks (Fig. 2) that was then corrected by teachers and re-written into larger official notebooks, resulting in 1,128 separate manuscript volumes, organized according to parish, barony, county and province (Fig. 3). The entire collection, which has been hitherto largely unpublished and unexplored, is now digitalized and available at www.duchas.ie

Fig. 2. Original Copybooks for the SC 1937-8



Fig. 3. Manuscript Volumes from the SC 1937-8



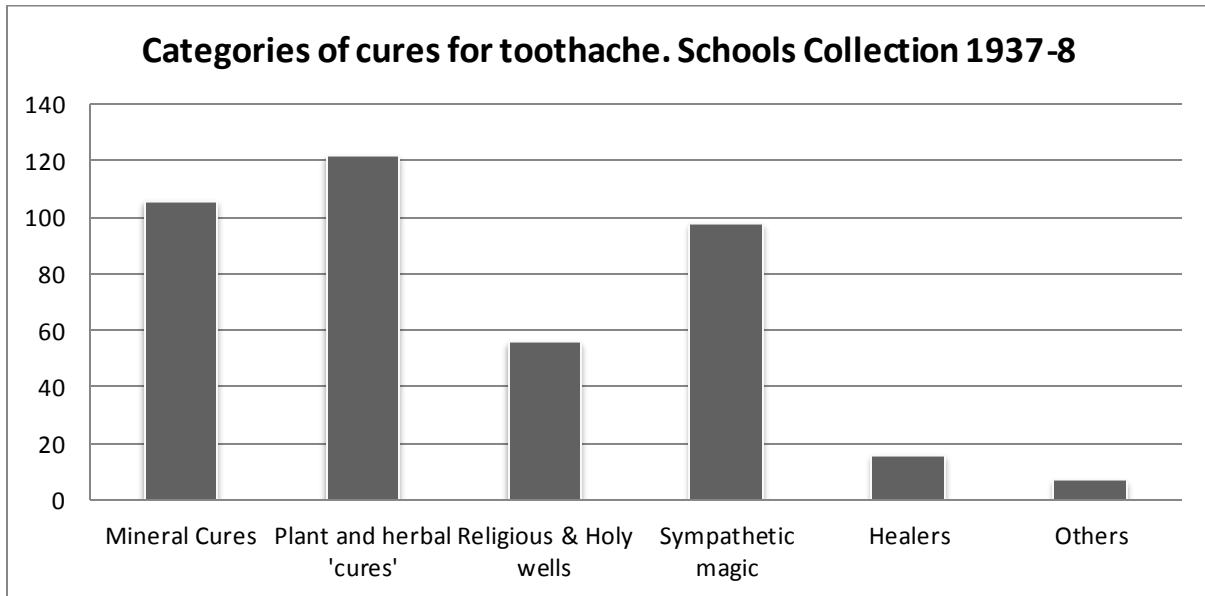
Sampling

In the 1930s each of the counties in Ireland were divided into areas called baronies, which was a historical subdivision. Some counties, e.g. Cork, had 22 baronies, whilst others, e.g. Leitrim, had 5. To mirror the sampling of The Schools' Collection, a school from each barony in each of the counties was selected for inclusion in the study. This gives a sample from over 270 baronies. 240 volumes were sampled and over 1,200 hand-written pages of cures were transcribed. The age range of children who collected the material was 10-14 years, with the mean age 13.5 years. Main informants for the children were parents, grandparents, neighbors, aunts, and uncles, in that order. The age of informants was 30-91 years, with the mean age 58 years. The medical folklore covered the period of 1865-1938, assuming the informants knew the cures by the time they were 18 years of age. The 'cure' narrative was initially transcribed and translated from Irish as required. Where the toothache cure was written in Irish, the original is given followed by an English translation throughout this paper. A coding system based on illness/disease/symptom generated from the emerging data set gave 131 separate codes, from abscess to wrinkles. However, 70% of all cures recorded were for 19 specific conditions; the top three were: Warts, Whooping cough/chin Cough and Toothache. Thus, cures for toothache were the third most common recorded, which mirrors the lack of affordable dental services for all during this time period. Toothache cures were classified using the standard animal, plant, mineral, and magico-religious system.

Findings

A total of 6,847 cures were included in the study, of which 405 were toothache cures, whose distribution covered all 26 counties of Ireland. Plant and herbal cures were the highest category (30.1%), followed by mineral cures (26.18%), and magico-religious cures (42%). Magico-religious cures were subdivided into sympathetic magic (24.2%), religious and Holy well cures (13.83%), cures attributed to 'healers' (3.97%); finally, the category Other also occurred (1.7%). Whilst many of these categories are self-explanatory, mineral cures included the use of: soot, salt, iodine, etc. Religious and Holy well cures comprise the recitation of prayers and drinking of Holy water. Religion in Ireland in the 1930s and beyond was dominated by Roman Catholicism and this is clearly reflected within the collection. (See Table 1).

Table.1. Categories of Cures for Toothache.



Note: Magico-religious cures are subdivided into Sympathetic magic, Religious and Holy wells and Healers in the above Table

Plant and Mineral Cures

Plant Cures

Unsurprisingly, all over the world, both native and introduced plant products formed the majority of ancient pharmacological agents that may have been valuable in treating dental pain ⁹. The earliest records of plants being used for medicinal purposes were depicted on clay tablets in cuneiform script from Mesopotamia (2600 BC) which documented oils from the Cypress tree (*Cupressus sempervirens*) and Myrrh, a gum resin obtained from the *Commiphora* trees ¹⁰. During the Middle Ages the monasteries in Ireland, England, France and Germany preserved this knowledge ¹¹.

Among the plants used to treat toothache in this study, tobacco and pepper predominated, with 24 and 18 cures respectively. The tobacco plant was introduced to the UK in the sixteenth century and in Ireland thereafter, being used both medicinally and recreationally. There was a belief that tobacco could prevent infection: for example, Gabrielle Hatfield ¹² remarked that in

the eighteenth century, smoking tobacco was believed to protect against smallpox. One informant in our study attested to its effectiveness, *Here is a cure for toothache. Get some tobacco and put it on your tooth. Then take it out after five minutes and the toothache will be better. I tried this cure as well and it succeeded* (SC Vol 798: pp. 99-100, Dublin).

Pepper and mustard were used in 18 and 9 separate cures respectively. In medical folkloric terms, the plants were viewed as ‘counter-irritating agents’ and used for pain ¹². Pepper was popular for toothache due to tooth decay, *Strong peppers if shook on a rotten tooth will cure toothache* (SC Vol 451: p. 26, Kerry), as was mustard, *A cure for toothache is to put some mustard in the hole of the tooth* (SC Vol 880: p. 60, Wexford). Capsaicin in red peppers has been used for centuries for pain relief ¹³. Unfortunately, The Schools’ Collection did not identify the specific type of pepper used in these cures e.g. chilli pepper, black pepper, red peppers.

Among other plants used to treat toothache in Ireland, albeit less frequently, were cloves, potatoes, camomile and ginger. Oil derived from the flower buds of cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) featured in 8 cures; it has long been employed to alleviate dental pain and is still used today. This spice may not have reached the Mediterranean world much before the time of Alexander of Tralles (525-605 AD), since it seems to have been unknown in Ancient Rome ¹⁴. Gabrielle Hatfield suggested that in folk medicine terms, cloves are a relatively recent remedy for toothache, most likely sourced from published books ¹². Cloves could be sucked, or the oil was used; *Cure for toothache. Two or three drops of essential oil of cloves put upon a small piece of lint or cotton wool, and placed in the hollow of the tooth will be found to have the active power of curing the toothache without destroying the tooth or injuring the gums* (SC Vol 1010: p. 310, Cavan); or the water in which cloves were cooked was also reported as effective, *...Boil cloves, and take the water off and drink it and it will cure the toothache* (SC Vol 993: p. 119, Cavan).

The humble potato (*Solanum tuberosum*) was introduced into Ireland in 1588 and became the dietary staple of about 8 million Irish people by the early nineteenth century. It is thus unsurprising that this dietary staple was and is, used in multiple traditional medical cures in Ireland. Cures using raw potatoes, water in which potatoes have been cooked, juice of a potato, cooked potatoes themselves and carrying a potato in a pocket as an amulet to ward off illness or disease are examples of the ways the potato has been used as a folk cure in Ireland and Scotland

¹². The cures in The Schools' Collection focused on the use of the potato as an amulet; *A cure for a toothache is to go into a garden where potatoes grow, get a potato pecked by a crow, put it into your pocket, never let it fall out and you'll never get a toothache again* (SC Vol 481: p. 340, Limerick). It was also used raw, *Get a slice of raw potato and put it to the cheek the toothache is and it would cure* (SC Vol 849: p. 321, Kilkenny).

Both camomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) and ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) were widely found in folk medicine. Camomile is a native plant, which has been used in Ireland and the UK as a pain killer, including dental pain ¹². The camomile was taken as a tea, *Leigheasann coimeán meal tinneas fiachail [Camomile cures a toothache]* (SC Vol 469: p. 49, Kerry), or steam inhalation, *Camomile flowers drawn like tea and poured in to a jug and the steam inhaled* (SC Vol 909: p. 76, Carlow). Ginger is not native to Ireland and Allen and Hatfield ¹⁴ argue this is why its use in British and Irish folk medicine was and is limited and suggest that its introduction to Ireland is relatively recent. This is not the case in North America, where ginger became naturalized back in the sixteenth century, thus having a much wider application in North American folk medicine. Ginger was also used widely in Hawaiian folk tradition ¹⁵. Biting on the roast ginger root is said to increase saliva production, soaking the sore tooth in saliva and ginger and leading to relief ¹⁵. Other plant cures for toothache recorded in The Schools' Collection included: (the following do not necessarily need to be capitalized) alum (3 cures), garlic (3), marigold (2), chickweed (2), wild thyme (2), southernwood (1), wild carrot (1), yarrow (1), roast figs (1), horse radish (1), bran (1), cabbage leaf (1), leek (1), onion (1), poppies (1), sage tea (1) and laurel leaves (1).

Mineral Cures

Salt and water were the two most widespread substances recorded by the children (30 cures for salt and water and 17 for water alone). For example, an informant stated: *Toothache-To put hot water and salt in your mouth* (SC Vol 849: p. 318, Kilkenny). Water itself was commonly used to relieve toothache: usually, the sufferer was instructed to fill his mouth with cold water, and to stand with his back to the fire until it boiled. Some informants gave clues as to the reasons why water might have provided relief in their opinions: *Keeping cold water inside the mouth for a*

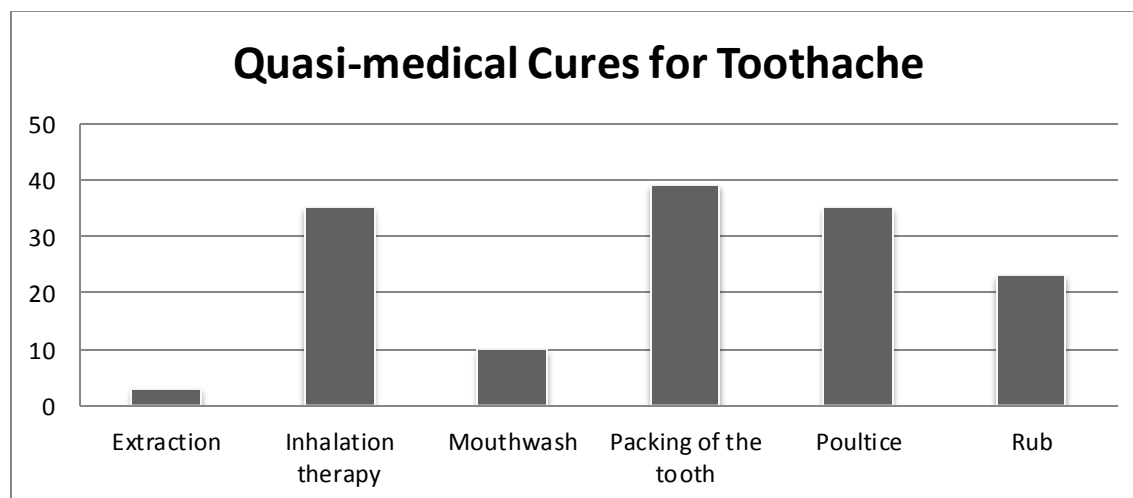
while may have helped to numb it, reducing the pain (SC Vol 679: pp. 304-305, Louth), or *The shock given by the cold water could cure* (SC Vol 803: p. 202, Offaly).

Whilst alcohol has been used internationally in folk cures for toothache, only 5 separate cures were found that involved alcohol being either rubbed on the gums, *Rub a drop of whiskey to the gums* (SC Vol 324: p. 275, Cork), or placed directly on the tooth, *A cure for toothache is to burn [heat] some whiskey and put a drop of it in the sore tooth. It would go then* (SC Vol 754: p. 228, Longford). Interestingly, twice as many cures employed iodine, rather than alcohol, which is discussed below under Quasi-medical cures.

Quasi-medical Cures

Within the plant and mineral cures, many were applied in quasi-medical procedures, such as packing the tooth with tobacco and other plants, smoking tobacco or gargling. Table 2 shows a breakdown of quasi-medical procedures for toothache (including extraction, which is not part of the plant and mineral cures).

Table.2. Quasi-medical cures for Toothache



Packing the tooth was the most common quasi-medical treatment (35.9%). The tooth was most commonly packed with tobacco, *If there is a hole in the tooth, stuff it with tobacco* (SC Vol 324: p. 275, Cork). Packing an ailing tooth with tobacco was an international cure; most noticeably, it was practiced by Native American populations in the sixteenth century, as noted by

the Spanish physician, Nicholas Monardes ¹⁶. Iodine and cotton wool was also commonly used to pack teeth, *A cure for toothache is to get a piece of cotton wool soaked in iodine and put it into your tooth* (SC Vol 659: p. 237, Louth). Iodine was available to purchase in the 1930s and it seems clear that some folk cures were thus mixed with semi-medical cures in the repertoire of folk/lay healing.

Inhalation of hot smoke predominantly and sometimes steam was also a treatment for toothache. Tobacco was commonly used in inhalation therapy for toothache (82.9% of all inhalation cures). The smoke was inhaled via a pipe or cigarette, *Tobacco, fill your mouth full of smoke and allow it to remain for five minutes or so* (SC Vol 1114: p. 87, Donegal). All the smoking and inhalation cures mentioned in The Schools' Collection may implicitly rely on the once commonly-held belief that toothache was caused by a tooth-worm. The belief was widespread up to the seventeenth century ^{17, 18}; however no 'cures' in the study under investigation referred explicitly to the tooth-worm. William Black ¹⁸ cited a 1607 English version of the *Regimen Sanitatis Salernitanum* (The Salernitan Rule of Health), of the twelfth or thirteenth century, in which a cure for tooth-worm involved the smoke of Frankincense (*Boswellia*), henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) and onion seed (*Allium cepa*) combined. Black ¹⁸ himself suggested that tobacco was used to replace Frankincense. More internationally, women in Moravia in the Czech Republic killed the tooth worms by smoking their husbands' pipes for a while (p. 132) ¹⁷. In, the 1940s a young boy in Iraq complaining of a toothache was advised to 'smoke it out' by holding the smoke of a cigarette in his mouth and when finally blew it out, the toothache would disappear ¹⁹ and Ring ²⁰ suggested that the most common method to treat tooth-worm was to smoke him out using burning henbane seeds.

The application of a poultice to the jaw was also a common treatment, e.g. *Heat some ordinary salt on a shovel over the fire. Place in an old sock and apply to the jaw* (SC Vol 155: p. 20, Sligo). Rubbing the affected tooth with a substance was a popular procedure; *Toothache: rub bread soda on it* (SC Vol 853: p. 199, Kilkenny). Salt was a common mineral used as a mouthwash; *Rinsing your mouth out with salt & hot water could cure a toothache* (SC Vol 867: p. 62, Kilkenny). Finally, there were a few instances of tooth extraction, chiefly by using a thread and a cord, or the blacksmith's anvil *To pull a tooth – tie a cord around it and tie it to a smith's anvil* (SC Vol 481: p. 337, Limerick). While not significant from a purely quantitative point of

view, they should nonetheless be mentioned, as they indicated traditional, home-made dental practices.

Magico-religious cures

The magico-religious cures were subdivided into Sympathetic magic, Religious and Holy wells cures, and Healers. In total, they comprised 42% of all toothache cures in the study. Magico-religious cures, drawing on sympathetic magic, occurred frequently in Irish folk medicine; more specifically, toothache cures from Ireland encompassed both homeopathic and contagious magic.

Frog cures for toothache

Within the broad category of sympathetic magic, the most common toothache cure, attested over fifty times, and occurring in 23 of the 26 counties of Ireland, consisted of putting a live frog inside the sufferer's mouth. In most cases, the frog was placed inside the mouth, kept there for a few minutes, and then taken out. Sometimes it was detailed that the frog must screech, invariably three or nine times; or that its leg, or back, must be licked by the sufferer; or that the frog's legs must be crushed. Occasionally, ceremonial religious words were recited while the cure was being performed, or the sign of the Cross was made. For instance: *Cure for a toothache; Get a frog and make the sign of the cross on the tooth with the frog* (SC Vol 923: p. 25, Wicklow). The frog was rubbed on the affected tooth and or along the gums: *Sé an leigheas atá ar daigeacha fiacail ná frog a chuimilt taobh istigh ar an fiacail* [The cure for toothache is to rub a frog on the inside of your mouth, against the tooth] (SC Vol 129: p. 321, Mayo). Remembering the socio-cultural context in which these 'cures' were collected; a strongly Catholic country in the 1930s, it is unsurprising to see the incorporation of religious elements in sympathetic magic cures. By placing a frog into the mouth of a toothache sufferer, the toothache was transferred from the person to the animal. This was explicitly stated by an informant; the words *Frog, frog, take the sting of the toothache*, were uttered while the frog was put in the patient's mouth (SC Vol 672: p. 205, Louth). The Roman writer Pliny the Elder (27-79 AD), in his work *Historia Naturalis* or *Natural History* included many frog cures for toothache, such as the elimination of toothache by rinsing your teeth in a solution made from frogs boiled in vinegar, or by tying a whole frog to

your jaw ²¹. Frogs still feature prominently in folk medicine worldwide. They were associated with healing and rebirth because they metamorphose from one form to another ²². Also, many societies and cultures have revered frogs for their healing powers, because frogs were inextricably linked with water, and water ²² was associated with cleansing. It is likely, therefore, that frog ‘cures’ were of significant antiquity, dating to back to the time of Pliny the Elder at a minimum.

Cures involving the dead or animal bones

A tooth usually had to be placed inside the sufferer’s mouth, or even taken from the corpse using the patient’s own teeth; *The remedy for toothache long ago was to pull a tooth out of a dead man’s skull with the person’s own teeth. It was said that the person would never have the toothache again* (SC Vol 983: p. 4, Cavan). Less frequently, it was the finger or hand of a dead person which was used; *Rub finger of a dead person on to the tooth, this kills the pain* (SC Vol p. 22: 506, Galway). In Black’s ¹⁸ work, an almost identical cure was recorded from the north-east of Scotland. The cures using teeth or bones from the dead were an example of homeopathic magic: both the teeth of the corpses and their finger bones resembled teeth. The rationale behind these cures was to sympathetically transfer the toothache to the dead. In addition to human teeth and bones, the bones of two different animals and one fish were said to protect against toothache: hedgehog, horse, and haddock. In all cases, it was the tooth or jawbone that was used for the cure. The animal’s tooth or jawbone was either kept in the sufferer’s pocket, or sewn to clothes and used as an amulet. An informant argued older fish bones were more powerful, *Carry the jaw bone of a haddock in the pocket and the older the bone was the better* (SC Vol 1114: p. 87, Donegal). Similarly, the Irish writer and poet Lady Wilde wrote in 1887; *Carry in your pocket the two jaw-bones of a haddock; for ever since the miracle of the loaves and fishes, these bones are an infallible remedy against toothache, and the older they are the better, as nearer the time of the miracle* (p. 90) ²³.

Holy Wells and Religious Cures

Twenty-nine cures focused on Holy wells, the water of which was said to have curative properties for toothache. The cure involved either drinking the water or rubbing it to the affected tooth; *There is a holy well in this district. It is on James Flood's land, about seven perches from Lough Gowna shore. It is called St. Colmcille's well. People still visit it. A lot of people have been cured at it. It is said that there is a cure for toothache, pains, rash etc. They rub the water to the affected part* (SC Vol 762: p. 154, Longford). Sometimes, however, informants specified that it was not merely the water *per se*, but the elaborate rituals performed at the holy well – of which drinking the water was merely a part – which stimulated self-healing. For example:

Particulars of a Holy Well - Toberagrahig or Tobar a' Gathaigh. This holy well is situated in the townland of Dromore in the parish of Kenmare. It is also frequented for cure of such ailments as toothache, eye injury, nervousness. Three rounds of circulation journeys are paid and the rosary recited. Rounds are made in clockwise (West to East) direction; older inhabitants recited Our Father, Hail Mary and Creed. Water of well was applied to the affected part. It was also drunk but not removed or carried away. Offerings were made on completion of ritual... (SC Vol 465: pp. 29-30, Kerry).

The history of the healing power of water, including holy wells, in Ireland and internationally, is extremely long ²⁴. There is currently great debate as to whether Irish holy wells are pagan in origin. At the very least, it can be claimed with certainty that Celtic cosmologies revolved around trees, rocks, springs, rivers, lakes and the sea. ²⁴Ronan Foley explains the supposed healing properties of holy wells; ²⁴*Holy wells provide an important psycho-cultural, though contested, link to Ireland's pagan and Christian pasts and act simultaneously as sites of physical, mental and spiritual healing* (p. 16). Clearly, holy wells are not unique to Ireland; however the tradition seems to be particularly strong here. There are 3,047 officially recorded holy wells across the small island of Ireland which only covers 84,431 square kilometres or 32,599 square miles.

Charms or incantations were also used in toothache cures. They consisted of special words, supposed to have supernatural or religious efficacy and drawing upon apocryphal religious books. The most well-known charm was the one to St. Peter, which was said to use the

words of Jesus, thus blurring the boundaries between religious prayer and ritual incantation or charm. The first example is written as it appears in the volume, as a verse;

Toothache – by saying each morning or by wearing on a card the following little verse:

*As Peter lay weeping,
On a marble stone,
Jesus came to him alone,
What ails thou Peter he said,
Dear Lord I am troubled with a toothache.* (SC Vol 546: pp. 124-125, Tipperary)

Wearing the charm on a card transformed the cure from a charm to an amulet. The following example is a little more detailed and claims to prevent as well as curing toothache:

As St. Peter sat on a marble stone, Jesus passed by and saw him alone. ‘What aileth thee Peter?’ ‘A toothache my Lord’. ‘Rise up Peter’, he said and take these words in my name. ‘Jesus who healeth all ills, heal me’ and thou shalt never have a toothache. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen. (SC Vol 617: p. 126, Clare).

These charms were versions of the so-called *Super Petram* charm, the most common toothache charm both in Ireland and Europe. The popularity of the charm in a pan-European context is well known in folklore ²⁵, and the earliest fragmentary Latin version dated back to the tenth century ²⁵. Medical charms can be seen as bridges between this world and the ‘other world’, and as ritual means of addressing ailments by combining special language/words and special actions (e.g. making the sign of the Cross).

Discussion

Both the frog cures, and those using teeth and jawbones of animals, were examples of transference. Hand (1980) explained the principle of transference; *The disease is passed on by direct or indirect contact between the victim and the person, animal, plant or object to which the disease is communicated* (p.17) ²⁶. By putting a live frog into the sufferer’s mouth, the animal was thought to take the malady into itself. *The infection of the new agent is thought to free the victim himself* (Hand 1980, p.18) ²⁶. However, in the case of toothache cures involving dead bodies, the corpse acted as an intermediary in the burial of the disease, on its journey to the ‘other world’, rather than as a direct victim ²⁶. Transference, or the notion that sickness can be transferred to other beings was widespread internationally ⁷. The idea probably stemmed from

societies noticing the contagiousness of certain diseases, without understanding the concept of infection control. For instance, in ancient Rome, Pliny wrote that stomach pains were treated by transferring them into a puppy or a duck ²¹.

The reader may wonder how putting a frog into a toothache-sufferer's mouth, or carrying a haddock's jawbone as an amulet, could give relief to the sufferer. A possible answer lies in the psychological component of folk medicine, which is linked to the placebo effect. The relatively recent significant redefinition of the placebo effect is as an "*effect due to the meaning of an intervention*" ²⁷. Thus, the placebo effect was reframed from a nuisance to a potential resource within healthcare. As remarked by Moerman, ²⁷treating illnesses has both psychological and physiological components, and the placebo effect taps into the former. If a sufferer believes that the cure will be effective, it may have a concrete psychological effect on his wellbeing. An informant summed this up, when she said: *These remedies were no good unless you believed in them* (SC Vol 1109: p. 111, Donegal). The very act of doing something about the toothache may bring relief. In short, the positive psychological effect of belief and ritual cannot be underestimated.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, folk remedies for toothache in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland were extremely varied, ranging from herbal and mineral substances, often used in quasi-medical treatments, such as packing the hole with tobacco or pepper, or gargling with water and salt, to cures relying on magico-religious beliefs, such as putting a live frog in the sufferer's mouth, or using teeth or bones from dead corpses and animals. It is possible that cures such as smoking tobacco to relieve a toothache may actually be the remnant of a once widespread belief: that toothache is caused by a worm in the tooth. Through smoking, the worm was fumigated from the mouth, and with it, the toothache cleared.

This sampling of a large national folklore survey identifies the importance of folk cures for toothache, the third most common ailment recorded by individuals within Irish society at the time. Several points arise from this analysis. The same cure was repeated time and time again, albeit with some variations, across all counties in the Republic of Ireland e.g. putting a frog in

your mouth and the tooth from a corpse. Thus, these lay cures were known nationally, as opposed to locally. From a quantitative point of view, magico-religious cures account for 42% of all toothache cures in this study. It also appears that people used whatever was available: tobacco, potatoes, cloves, cures based solely on folk beliefs, and chemicals bought in chemist shops, such as iodine. Those were not mutually exclusive. All remedies should be set against the wider social and historical background to which they belonged: both ailments and cures were embedded in everyday life. It is instructive to remember that these cures were collected in the 1930s, a pre-antibiotic era, with low numbers of dentists operating in Ireland. By the end of 1922, following the civil war and the ensuing dissolution of the Irish Branch of the British Dental Association, the Irish Dental Association had only 180 members ². This may also explain why in the entire 240 volumes sampled for this project; dentists as a profession were never directly or indirectly written about, unlike medical doctors.

References

Schools' Collection 1937-38. Volumes 1-1,128. National Folklore Collection, UCD. Dublin.

1. World Health Organisation. WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2014-2023. Geneva: World Health Organisation. 2013.
2. Lee, JB. The History of the Irish Dental Association 1922-1972. Dublin: Irish Dental Association. 1972.
3. Kelly J. 'I Was Right Glad to Be Rid of It?': Dental Medical Practice in Eighteenth-Century Ireland. In: *Gender and Medicine in Ireland, 1700-1950* (eds) Preston M. & Ó hÓgartaigh M. New York: Syracuse University Press. 2012.
4. Samuel Steel Advertisement. *Dublin Weekly Journal*, 27th August 1727.
5. Yoder D. Folk medicine. In: *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction* (ed) R. M. Dorson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1972.
6. Granger H. Of the Teeth. *The Journal of American Folklore* 1961; 74(291):47-56.
7. Frazer JG. The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion. New York: Macmillan. 1890.
8. Ó Súilleabháin S. Irish Folklore and Tradition. Dublin: Irish Folklore Commission. 1937.
9. Becker MJ & MacIntosh Turfa J. The Etruscans and the History of Dentistry: The Golden Smile Through the Ages. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. 2017.
10. Cragg GM & Newman DJ. Biodiversity: A continuing source of novel drug leads. *Pure Applied Chemistry* 2005; 77:7-24.
11. Dias DA, Urban S and Roessner U. A Historical Overview of Natural Products in Drug Discovery. *Metabolites* 2012; (2):303-336.
12. Hatfield G. Encyclopedia of Folk Medicine: Old World and New World Traditions. California: ABC CLIO Inc. 2004.
13. Fusco BM & Giacobazzo M. Peppers and Pain. The Promise of Capsaicin. *Drugs* 1997;53(6):909-914.
14. Allen DE & Hatfield G. Medicinal Plants in Folk Tradition: An Ethnobotany of Britain & Ireland. London: Timber Press. 2004.

15. Hoffman T. Ginger: An ancient remedy and modern miracle drug. *Hawaii Medical Journal* 2007;66 (12):326-327.
16. Tanner J. The Teeth in Folklore. *Western Folklore* 1968; 27(2):97-105.
17. Kanner L. The Folklore of the Teeth. New York: The Macmillan Company. 1928.
18. Black WG. Folk-medicine: a chapter in the history of culture. London: Published for the Folklore Society by E. Stock. 1883.
19. Al Hamdani M. & Wenzel M. The Worm in the Tooth. *Folklore* 1966;77(1):60-64.
20. Ring ME. Anton van Leeuwenhoek and the tooth-worm. *The Journal of the American Dental Association* 1971;83(5):999-1001.
21. Plinius SC. *Historia Naturalis*. Natural History. Translated by H. Rackham. 3rd ed. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press. 1967.
22. Crump M. Eye of Newt and Toe of Frog, Adder's Fork and Lizard's Leg. The Lore and Mythology of Amphibians and Reptiles. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2015.
23. Wilde, L. Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland. Boston: Ticknor and Co., Vol. II. 1887.
24. Foley R. Healing Waters. Therapeutic Landscapes in Historic and Contemporary Ireland. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group. 2016.
25. Roper J. English Verbal Charms. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica. 2005.
26. Hand WD. The Magical Transference of Disease. In *Magical Medicine: The Folkloric Component of Medicine in the Folk Belief, Custom, and Ritual of the Peoples of Europe and America* (ed.) Hand WD. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1980.
27. Moerman DE & Jonas WB. Deconstructing the placebo effect and finding the meaning response. *Annals of Internal Medicine* 2002;136: 471-476.