

EDITOR'S NOTE

Of all the part-time jobs that got me through college, my favorite was a brief stint as the story lady at the Brentwood Public Library. My stock in trade was fairy tales, the Grimmer and gorier the better. Whatever the traditional version, my princesses were pluckier, witches more malevolent, potions more magical and poisons ever so much nastier.



MARY ANN
STEINER

The fascination with potions and poisons is found in every human civilization. Substances used in ancient Egyptian rituals contained Blue Lotus of the Nile, a blooming plant that produced euphoric highs and increased sexual energy. Depictions of the flower decorate King Tutankhamen's mummy case, as well as many other Egyptian artifacts.

The Elixir of Life, supposedly fed to baby Zeus to ensure his immortality, confounded centuries of alchemists, magicians and physicians seeking to discover the secret formula for granting eternal life and magically healing wounds.

So potent was the ancient Celtic recipe for hallucinogenic mead that it caused visions of a wonderfully inviting afterlife. Warriors who drank the mead went to battle unafraid of injury or death. The ancient Incas were millennia ahead of their European counterparts in terms of pharmacology: In addition to the stimulant in coca leaves that could get their hearts racing and lungs pumping to be able to breathe in thin mountain air, they had an impressive pharmacopeia of minerals and herbs for antiseptics, antibiotics, painkillers and restoratives.

It has always been better living through chemistry. Relieving pain from injury and illness, easing anxiety, regulating blood pressure and preventing infection vastly improve the quality of our lives. Poets, musicians and inventors credit licit as well as illicit drugs for bursts of creativity that enhance the meaning and pleasure of human experience.

Cautionary tales about too much of a good thing have been told since long before Aesop. Most of us know that what heals us and makes us happy in moderation can bring us to ruin in excess. Potions can, and do, become poison.

The study of potions and poisons has developed into the current field of pharmacology — the science of therapeutics and toxicology. Like our

ancient forebears, we know the miracles and menace of drugs that can heal our maladies, reduce our pain, or break our spirits. Most of us can look to a friend or family member we'd be missing had they not had cancer treatments or kidney dialysis. Many of us also can point to clinical trials that failed our loved ones, instances of inappropriate medications or dosages, and prescription drug addictions that turned tragic.

This edition of *Health Progress* takes a cross section of topics that cluster around pharma today. Now that prescription drugs occupy the largest percentage of health care costs for Americans — more is spent on medications than on physician services, hospital stays or chronic illness treatments — there are important financial and ethical questions about the allocation of resources for developing new drugs, creating a distribution chain and formulating the price tags to cover medications for acute and chronic illnesses.

We have questions about who gets to participate in clinical trials and who bears the cost, as well as the risk, of people wanting to try potentially life-saving drugs not yet completely approved by the FDA.

As the population ages, there are more medication errors made during treatment of the elderly in their homes and in long-term care settings. What can we do to reduce the risks of error and improve the communication with seniors and their families about the drugs being prescribed?

The opioid epidemic calls for so much more than hand-wringing and blame. Where are the solutions, who is willing to minister from the trenches, and is there a role for Catholic health care, one that it may be just beginning to recognize and embrace?

We appreciate the expertise of this issue's cohort of authors. Pharma is a complicated topic whose scientific information is used, and occasionally misused, with financial, social and political implications. Thanks to each of our writers, you have an array of articles offering important information and great insight.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, March - April 2018
Copyright © 2018 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
