



Volume 3 Issue 1
(Jul-Dec)
2025

DOI: 10.5281/
zenodo.17361441

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Available from: [https://
esrfjums.co.in/index.php/main/
article/view/68](https://esrfjums.co.in/index.php/main/article/view/68)

Published by: Eureka Sciencetech Research
Foundation, Kolkata.

Online access: <https://esrfjums.co.in>

Strange But True: A Quiz on Unusual Medical Practices

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1. Back in the late 1800s and early 1900s, before the age of modern cosmetic surgery, people sought ways to change their appearance and enhance features like cheeks and breasts. One popular method involved injecting a waxy, petroleum-based substance under the skin to add volume. While initially promising as a beauty treatment, this practice soon caused serious problems—patients developed hard, painful lumps that were difficult to remove and led to chronic inflammation. The procedure was eventually abandoned due to these complications.

What was this substance?

2. Before the discovery of safe and reliable blood transfusions, doctors tried various substances to replace lost blood in patients who were severely injured or bleeding. One of the liquids injected was a common, nutritious drink found in nearly every household and known for its role in infant nutrition and bone health. Unfortunately, this practice often led to severe complications, including infections and blood clots, and did not prove effective as a blood substitute.

Can you identify the liquid?

3. These are known to cause a condition called myiasis which can lead to painful, necrotic wounds requiring urgent medical or surgical intervention. However, when sterilized and medically controlled, they are now used in modern medicine to selectively debride necrotic tissue in chronic, non-healing wounds.

What is the name of this therapy and the name of the organism used for this purpose?

4. For hundreds of years, a dense, shiny, and toxic heavy metal was used by physicians as a treatment for a serious sexually transmitted infection transmitted by spiral shaped bacteria. It was given in ointments or pills despite being highly poisonous and often causing serious side effects, including nerve damage and death. This practice lasted until safer and more effective treatments were discovered.

What was the metal used and for which disease?

5. In the early 1900s, an unusual health device became popular among people hoping to improve their vitality and treat various ailments. This device, worn like a belt around the abdomen, delivered mild electrical currents to the body. It was advertised as a cure for fatigue, sexual problems, and general weakness. However, scientific research eventually showed it had no real medical benefits, and the device was discarded.

What was the name of this device?

6. During times of extreme hardship, such as war, medical practitioners sometimes resorted to unconventional methods when supplies were scarce. One such method involved using the droppings of a commonly found bird, believed to have disinfectant properties, and applying them to wounds to prevent infection. It was later found that this treatment often caused more harm than good.

Which bird's droppings?



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7. Archaeological evidence shows that thousands of years ago, ancient humans performed a surgical procedure where they deliberately removed a round section of the skull bone. They believed this could relieve headaches, seizures, or even release evil spirits causing illness. Surprisingly, many of these patients survived the procedure, making this one of the oldest known surgical interventions.

What is the name of this procedure?

8. After scientists discovered radioactivity, a particular radioactive element was added to many consumer health products, including drinking water and beauty creams. People believed it could increase energy and cure diseases. But since the harmful effects of radiation were not yet understood, many people suffered serious health problems, including cancers, due to exposure.

Which radioactive element was used?

9. In the first half of the 20th century, doctors tried an extreme brain surgery where they cut connections in the front part of the brain to try to treat mental illnesses like schizophrenia or severe depression. While it was considered a breakthrough at first, the operation often caused significant personality changes, cognitive decline, and sometimes even death. It is now rejected by modern medicine.

What is the medical term for this controversial brain surgery?

10. In the 1700s, doctors attempted to revive drowned or unconscious people by blowing smoke from a commonly cultivated plant into the rectum. This was believed to stimulate breathing and revive life. Though widely used at the time, modern medicine has since shown this method to be ineffective and outdated.

What was this unusual resuscitation technique and which plant was used?

11. Long before modern stimulant medications, an alkaloid extracted from the leaves of a tropical plant was used in psychiatry to help awaken patients from mental stupor and stimulate the nervous system. It was also used as a local anesthetic. However, because of its highly addictive nature and harmful side effects, its use has been largely abandoned.

Which alkaloid was used for this purpose?

12. In the early 1900s, a medical treatment claimed to restore male fertility and sexual function by surgically implanting testicles from a common farm animal into men. The procedure was dangerous, scientifically unsupported, and led to serious complications, including death. It is now remembered as a medical fraud.

From which animal were these testicles collected

13. During the Renaissance and up to the 18th century, European medicine included a mysterious powder made by grinding up embalmed bodies from an ancient civilization renowned for its burial practices. This powder was believed to cure a wide range of ailments, but its use sparked ethical debates and contributed

to grave robberies.

What was the name of this medicinal powder?

14. Since ancient times, various civilizations have employed a controversial practice involving a bodily fluid often discarded as waste. This fluid was believed to contain healing properties capable of treating a variety of ailments, from skin conditions to internal diseases. Despite its widespread historical use, modern medicine has largely dismissed the practice as ineffective and potentially harmful. It was once even praised as a “life-giving elixir” or “golden remedy” across diverse cultural texts.

What is this bodily fluid?

15. For centuries, physicians across cultures relied on a small invertebrate believing this could treat a variety of illnesses by “balancing the humors.” While the traditional use declined with modern medicine, these organisms were never completely forgotten. Today, they are still used in microsurgical procedures, especially to relieve venous congestion after tissue grafts and implantations. Their saliva contains a natural anticoagulant — the basis of a class of modern synthetic anticoagulants.

What is the name of this organism and the anticoagulant?

1. Paraffin wax
2. Milk
3. Maggot Debridement Therapy (MDT); Green bottle fly (*Lucilia sericata*)
4. Mercury; Syphilis
5. Electrotherapy belt
6. Pigeon
7. Trepanning (or Trepanation)
8. Radium
9. Lobotomy (Prefrontal lobotomy)
10. Tobacco smoke enema; Tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*)
11. Cocaine (Erythroxylum coca)
12. Goat
13. Mummy (Mummy Powder)
14. Urine
15. Leech (*Hirudo medicinalis*); Hirudin

Answers

