

The Hydropathic Highway to Health: Exercise on the Road to Wellness

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Amidst the turmoil over medical theory and practice in the nineteenth century, hydropathic medicine emerged as a significant challenger to the hegemony of institutionalized sectarian medicine. Regular physicians, the predecessors of "modern" AMA-certified medical practitioners, adopted the "heroic" methods of treatment including the use of blood-letting, emetics and cathartics. Homeopathy, the other major medical alternative, established a treatment based on minimal doses of drugs. In contrast, hydropathy disdained the use of all drugs in favour of the "water-cure."

Using water as a therapeutic had been part of medical treatment in America since colonial times. However, not until Austrian Victor Priessnitz formulated a comprehensive program, was water used as the primary agent of a medical system. One hydropath defined the water-cure as the method of treating disease by water, air, exercise, and diet, with water as the "principle curative agent." By the late 1840s the water-cure had become popular in the United States.

A radical departure from accepted disease management, the water-cure became a movement as well as a treatment. It attracted people seeking order, self-determination, and more control over their lives and health. At the height of its popularity between 1840 and 1870, hydropathy promoted: over 200 away-from-home, live-in spas; a journal whose subscription list reached 100,000 in the 1850s; a number of texts; some short-lived colleges; and thousands of self-healers. In addition, hydropaths routinely trained women physicians.

Hydropaths emphasized physical education as part of prevention. Climbing and horseback riding were the best forms of daily out-door exercise. If an individual could not exercise outside, activity should be practised in a large, well-ventilated room. Jumping, hopping, skipping, and running were viewed as natural and healthy exercises as was walking. Exercise for infants was also recommended. A gentle carrying motion was preferred for infants while rocking and swimming was discouraged. Children, especially were believed to need exercise. One hydropath criticized the school system for not allowing any time for exercise, arguing that children should be able to run, jump, and dance in order to expand their chest and lungs. Swimming and riding were also considered to be advantageous.

Hydropaths advocated that water and exercise be combined as remedial agents. At the hydropathic spas and boarding houses, patients were expected to exercise frequently every day. Exercise was especially important after a cold bath in order to

facilitate the proper stimulating action. Walking was the most healthful and invigorating exercise. When someone was unable to walk, other forms of exercise, such as sewing or chopping wood, dancing, and gymnastics were advocated.

Hydropathic treatment combined the cleansing benefits of water with a natural diet and exercise in fresh air. The purpose of the water-cure was to intensify the curing effects of nature.