References


Charmed to be sure

The countryman is perhaps a more simple trusting soul, but with a degree of cunning, quite different from his counterpart used to a more comfortable urban life of convenience. This contrast became evident one dark winter’s night in the west of Northern Ireland. The Ballygawley roundabout is a well-known landmark, dividing the Province into east and west. To the west, it is pure farming country where science has not fully arrived to some living in this land. There is a belief in fairies and charms; farmers are loath to disturb fairy mounds and the phase of the moon needs to be ascertained as it could be testing providence to take important decisions at the full moon.

Having seen a long line of appointments all day, my last man came in and sat down carefully. He was a well-built man with a large ruddy face. His high colour I suspected was due to a mixture of fresh air and Guinness. It was six weeks since he had been able to give service to his employers, and they not unreasonably wished to know if and when he was likely to resume work. After a short discourse on the weather, he was questioned on his absence due to illness. Sick certificates showed haemorrhoids, which was confirmed by the patient as ‘terrible poiles’. Further confirmation of his condition followed. He dressed and pulled on a heavy winter greatcoat.

On treatment for his distressing condition, he volunteered that he was relying on a charm. Seeing my astonishment, he became somewhat indignant at my disbelief and the charm was produced from his greatcoat. It consisted of a piece of brown paper screwed up and held together by Sellotape. When I told him that there was nothing inside and I threatened to unravel it, he became quite animated. If the paper was unravelled, properties of the charm would be lost and his ‘poiles’ would remain. No amount of argument was going to alter his mind, so we agreed to differ.

Purveyors of charms are usually old ladies, who have the powers to make up charms, for a modest fee. Thyme, chamomile, and cockspur grass are sometimes used as the basis of treatment for a variety of conditions. Copper bangles are credited with curative powers, and worn to reduce arthritic symptoms by a surprising spectrum of the population. Liaison by the occupational physician with the general practitioner in such cases may bring about a more dynamic mode of treatment, giving ease to both employer and employee. One wonders however, if brown paper and Sellotape will ever make it into the NICE therapeutic lexicon for gastrointestinal conditions?

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