

Historical Happenings

HISTORICAL SNAKEBITE TREATMENTS

Firstly please be clear that the modern treatment of snakebite is set out in the latest St John Australian First Aid Manual. That is the form of treatment to be given using a pressure immobilisation bandage. What follows is a brief description of treatments for snake bite as recorded in various St John First Aid Manuals over past years.

Warning: These historical treatments are no longer to be used.

In 1895 the treatment of snakebite as advocated in the St John First Aid Manual was the application of 'a drop or two of strong ammonia to the bite and tie a ligature between the wound and heart. Give the patient some brandy or whisky and water'.

By 1905 up to two or three ligatures could be applied and they could be tightly twisted as tourniquets to stop blood flow. 'Caustic potash, pure carbolic acid, or any strong acid on a pointed piece of wood', was to be pushed into the bite area. If no caustic fluid was available, sucking the wound was allowed. The wound could be burned with a 'fusee', defined as 'a kind of match for lighting a pipe or cigar'.

In the fifteenth edition of the Manual (1910) the recommended treatment included keeping the affected limb low. By 1940 in the 39th edition time limits were given for tourniquets and drinking alcohol was abandoned in favour of milk, tea or strong coffee. Potassium permanganate was used as a wash of the bite site.

In the 40th edition (1955) there were new time limits for ligatures, and incision (making small X-shaped cuts) in the skin at the bite site was introduced. The role of the body's lymphatic system and the use of 'antivenin' were first mentioned.

In 1965 the use of reassurance by the first-aider was given prominence. Incision and sucking were no longer allowed. Affected limbs were now to be elevated and splinted.

Four years later the limb was to be cooled, not warmed as recommended from 1910 to 1929, and the time limit for constrictive bandages applied with the intention of obstructing arterial blood flow to the limb, was set at 90 minutes.

Modern treatments not dissimilar to the present recommendations were introduced in 1979. The aim was to slow the passage of lymph from the bite site to the rest of the body. The locally-based South Australian Dr. J White was a leader in promoting the new scientifically based treatments.

Clearly first aid treatments have changed over time. This historical fact should remind first aiders to keep up with the latest advice.

Question: What is the most common venomous snake in South Australia?

Answer given in the next edition of Open Airways.

Brian Fotheringham
Chairman



historical
society



Answer to the previous question. The word malaria literally means 'bad air'.



The St John Ambulance
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