

## Dermatological roots

Lakshman Ranasinghe\*

*Sri Lanka Journal of Dermatology*, 1995, 1, 12-15

In the 6th century, BC, Anuruddha therā's sister, Rohini, who lived in Kapilavatthu at the Himalayan foothills in (modern) Nepal, and possessed unsurpassed beauty, developed a severe skin eruption which affected even her angelic face. On the advice of her reverend brother, she sold her jewels and had a hall erected. She invited the Buddha to its dedication ceremony and offered him arms, and he apprised her that, in a previous birth, she had been the chief Consort of the King of Benares (Varanasi), and, "being jealous of a dancing girl whom the King loved, contrived to get powdered scabs on the girl's body, clothes and bed", as a result of which she "developed boils, and her skin was ruined". At the conclusion of the sermon, Rohini's disease vanished, and her body regained its golden hue<sup>1</sup>.

In early Christian history, Job was known to be the most righteous, and patient, of men. He suffered the loss of all his worldly goods, and all his children, "with anguish in his heart, but not a complaint. But when, as a final test" his body was riddled "with loathsome boils", then did "Job cry out in desperation for the why of his affliction".

Such is the misery and the hopelessness felt by those afflicted, particularly with skin disease.

In more recent times we have the story of Edgar Cayce who was born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, USA in 1877, and died in 1945. His incredible healing prowess are on thousands of microfilm records filed at the Foundation for Psychic Research at Virginia Beach, USA. This laymen's ability to diagnose, prescribe for and cure people whom he had never seen before astonished medical authorities around the world. In a book entitled "Many Mansions", first published in 1950, Dr Gina Cerminara, Psychologist from the University of Wisconsin, after several years of intensive research in parapsychology, described

Cayce's experiences and healings in lucid detail, and marvelled how he looked beyond the barriers of space and time into the past lives of thousands of patients<sup>2</sup>. In 1923 Cayce casually uttered, while in a hypnotic state, that drives, talents and abilities came from previous lives. He also referred to significant events in past incarnations as providing the background to present afflictions, and infirmities. A young woman musician of Kentucky, diagnosed as a hopeless case of Scleroderma at a prestigious clinic in Tennessee, was cured by him in one year. There was also the case of a woman who, since childhood, had suffered from allergies when she ate cereal grains, or came in contact with shoe leather and plastic spectacle frames. At twenty five she was told by Cayce that, in another birth, she had been a chemist and used many materials to produce itching in others. (The result, now, was humoral and cellular allergy). He said that if she avoided food that gave her trouble and leather tanned by usual process, and used leather tanned with oak instead, it would cause no harm. At forty she was still free of her hypersensitivities.

The *Mahāvamsa*, written by a monk named *Mahānāma* in the 6th century AD, is the chronological story and history of Ceylon from the 5th century, BC, when Prince Vijaya came, from, Bengal to settle and rule in Sri Lanka. One anecdote refers to Vasabha, a commoner, in the 1st century, AD, and comments that it had once been forecast that he would be King. Having "again heard from a 'leper' the certain prophecy that he would be King, he seized village after village, and reigned from 65 to 109, AD.

Part I of the *Chūlawamsa*, by Dhammakitti, which chronologically followed upon the *Mahāvamsa*, in the 12th century, states that the great benevolent Surgeon-Physician King, Buddhadasa (4th century) who is believed to have authored the *Sārārtha Sangraha*, was despised by a 'leper' who, in a former

\* Past President, Sri Lanka Association of Dermatology; Sometime Editor, Ceylon Medical Journal.

existence, had been his enemy, for, when he beheld the noble ruler at the zenith of glory, was filled with fury. It is likely that the word 'leper' crept in during translation of these great chronicles from the original Pali because leprosy was among several poorly defined and inadequately identified chronic, severe, and progressive skin diseases (*Mahākushta*) at that time. The *Mahāwamsa* also mentions many reciprocative gifts which the magnanimous King Dharmasoka, who unified India under one Parasol, and reigned from 325 BC, sent, with tidings, unto our King Devanampiyatissa. These included an unguentum, brought by the *Nāga* (tribe).

"Society in Medieval Ceylon", published in 1956, contains an account of social practices in the 13th century as described in the *Saddharma ratanavaliya* and other writings of that period, and the methods of treatment used then. These included oils and medicinal herbs used for external applications. It also refers to treatment of itch in a dog with the juice of a creeping plant called *Gōnil* (the Piper betel) mixed with *Ambul mōru* (sour whey). Reference is also made to *Barava* (elephantiasis from filariasis) and severe persistent skin diseases which included leprosy.

"A Therapeutic Guide to Ayurvedic Medicine", written in 1970 by Pandit R R Pathak of India, who was the sometime Director of the Ayurvedic Research Institute at Navinna, near Colombo, is a book based on ancient sanskrit Ayurvedic texts. In a 25-page Chapter on skin disease (*Tvak-vikāra*), he lists about 36 disorders which can be recognised as specific diagnoses (Table 1). Aetiologically, all diseases were considered to be a result of disturbances in the 3 bodily Humours, which were *Vātha* or wind, *Pitha* or bile, and *Sema* or phlegm. It may appear that these 3 Humours are identical with what one normally conceives when these terms are used. For example, "wind" in relation to human physiology would bring to mind belching (gaseous eructations) or flatus or even borborygmi; "bile" makes us think of nausea or bilious vomiting; and "phlegm" implies a cold or cough with copious saliva or sputum, or rhinorrhoea (catarrh). However, it is important to realize that

though these terms are in common use, the Ayurvedic concept of the 3 Humours cannot be subject to simplistic interpretation. All skin diseases were separated into the Major or Minor categories (Table 2). The ancients recognised 7 Major disorders and 11 Minor ones. On a basis of derangement of the Humours, all skin disorders were believed to be a result of fault in one, two or all three of these Humours. Thus they concluded that there are 7 aetiological bases for these diseases (Table 3). The most common of the 36 skin disorders was eczema, as today. It is worth noting that *Tinea versicolor* or *Aluhang* (literally, grey skin) was not considered a skin disease, but was termed *gōmara* and admired as providential embellishment, especially when it adorned the neck and upper torso of young women! Reminiscent, one could interject, of the delectable fungal veins in Danish blue cheese! Terms to describe the clinical features and the characteristics of lesions were rather limited, but constituted the basis of modern clinical dermatology. The macule and papule, and features such as weeping and dry were described (Table 4). On prophylactic aspects, the ancients believed in medicines which improved the health of the skin, and made it resistant to disease (Table 5). From the therapeutic angle the basic principle was that the causative Humour must be treated in addition to its manifestations (Table 6). Among a large number of herbal and other preparations used were several which are recognized as being at least kind to skin (Table 7).

There is no doubt that leprosy and pemphigus were included among the seven *Mahā kushta*.

Incidentally, Wilhelm Geiger, who set out to research the veracity, then translated into German, and published with logical and valuable annotations, the *Mahāwamsa* at the turn of the 19th century, was the metaphorical grandfather (father's father!) of the Geiger Counter. Later, the *Mahāwamsa* and *Chūla-wamsa* were translated into English by him and others. We pay tribute, at the end of 20th century, to the dedication of this pioneer who, among several, separated the abundant grains of truth from the anecdotal and legendary chaff in our illustrious chronicles, which are among the oldest on this Earth.

**Table 1. New English and old Sinhala nomenclature of dermatological disorders**

1. Eczema	Pama
2. Dandruff	Darunaka
3. Dry dermatitis	Rakasa
4. Pustular dermatitis	Vicharchika
5. Pustulosis of palms and soles	Vipadika
6. Pustulosis of scalp	Arunsika
7. Ringworm	Dadru
8. Scabies (the Itch)	Kandu or kachhu
9. Scrotal scabies	Vrishana kachhu
10. Pimples	Tvak pidika
11. Prickly heat	Ushmaja pidika
12. Psoriasis	Kittibha
13. Pityriasis	Sidhma
14. Leucoderma	Kilasa or svitra
15. Xeroderma pigmentosum	Charmakhya or gajacharma
16. Urticaria pigmentosa	Charmadala
17. Ichthyosis	Eka-kushta
18. Erythemas	Shataru
19. Intertrigo	Alasa
20. Urticaria	Shita pitta
21. Herpes zoster	Kaksha
22. Acne vulgaris	Yuvana pidika or mukhadushika
23. Follicular keratosis	Padmini kantaka
24. Congenital mole	Jatamani
25. "Leprosy"	Maha kushta (7 varieties)
26. Lepromatous leprosy	Kakana kushta
27. Corns	Charmakila
28. Chapping of soles	Pada dari
29. "Burning" soles	Pada daha
30. Alopecia	Indralupta
31. Head-lice	Yuka liksha
32. Actinomycosis	Valmika
33. Whitlow	Chippa or kunakha
34. Burns	Dagdha
35. Ulcers	Vrana
36. Traumatic ulcers	Kshatas

**Table 2. Aetiological varieties of skin disorders**

A. Major	B. Minor
Maha-kushta	Kshudra-kushta
(7 categories)	(11 categories)

**Table 3. Aetiological basis of skin disorders**

The three Humours: (wind bile phlegm)  
(vatha pitha sema)  
— are involved

1. Those arising mainly from vatha
2. Those arising mainly from pitha
3. Those arising mainly from sema
4. Those arising mainly from vatha and pitha
5. Those arising mainly from vatha and sema
6. Those arising mainly from pitha and sema
7. Those arising mainly from thun-dosa  
(Three Humours)

**Table 4. Some descriptive terms**

Weeping	—	Sravi
Dry	—	Sravahina
Macule	—	Vyanga or nyachha
Papule	—	Masaka
Lichen	—	Alasaka
Bulla	—	Vispota
Anti-pruritic	—	Kandu hara

**Table 5. Medicines believed to improve skin health**

Mustard oil  
Olive oil  
Juices of leaves — eg. kohomba (margosa)  
Turmeric  
Sesame oil  
Seeds of olinda (abrus)  
Paste of gram flour and turmeric with mustard oil

**Table 6. General principles of treatment**

Wind (වත)	—	Administer ghee
Bile (පිත)	—	Purgation (then) blood letting
Phlegm (පෙම, කප)	—	Emesis

**Table 7. Some therapeutic medicines and procedures**

Lemongrass oil with coconut oil for ringworm  
Ointment made from leaves of cassia for ringworm  
The juice of oleander for scalp ringworm  
A paste of cummin seed for pimples  
A paste of nutmeg with milk for pimples  
A paste of red sandalwood and turmeric with milk  
for pimples  
Sandalwood oil with mustard oil for pimples  
A paste of sandalwood, coriander seed and medicinal  
grasses with rose-water for prickly heat  
A paste of Indian hemp leaves for dandruff  
Olive oil, mustard oil and kohomba (Margosa) oil for  
dry eczema  
Pongamia seed oil for psoriasis and pityri asis  
Olinda (abrus) oil for leucoderma  
“Papaya” milk (papain) or cashew oil for corns  
Blood purifiers — eg. Saravadyarista and val  
maditiya kashaya  
Blood letting by leeches for “bilious” skin disorders

**References**

1. Malalasekera, GP. The Dictionary of Pali Proper Names, Vol. II, N — H, Luzac and Co., London 1960.
2. Cerminara, Gina. Many Mansions, New American Library, New York 1967.
3. The Mahāvamsa (English Translation), Chapter 35, line 66. Ceylon Govt. Information Dept., Colombo 1911.
4. The Chūlavamsa (English Translation), Chapter 37, line 152, Ceylon Govt. Information Dept., Colombo 1953.
5. The Mahāvamsa (Ibid), Chapter 11, line 29.
6. Ariapala MB. Society in Mediaeval Ceylon KVG de Silva, Colombo, 1956.
7. Pathak RR. A Therapeutic Guide to Ayurvedic Medicine, Shree Baidyanath Ayurved Bhawan Private Ltd., Patna 1970.