

BUSH REMEDIES - BEYOND THE BLACK STUMP.

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A writer in Elizabethan times claimed that “one would as soon find a black swan on the Thames, than an honest quack.”¹

Eventually explorers found black swans in Australia, but the real question is, did the honest quack thrive here also?

The early Europeans who came as convicts or free settlers to Australia would have brought many of their own familiar remedies with them, but they soon learnt to observe how the indigenous people, who have survived for 40000 years in the harsh environment of Australia, were able to treat all manner of diseases and ailments from the flora and fauna around them.

The FIRST Australian bush remedy I want to introduce to you is called “Eichorn’s Remedy” after its inventor, August Eichorn.



Originally the Remedy was produced by Eichorn and his wife at their home near Sydney and according to the package insert is, “manufactured from the secret formula of the late Mr. August Eichorn.” Currently the recipe is prepared by the Gundagai Pharmacy in northern New South Wales, and it contains Capsicum 1.08% , Ginger 2.17%, Nutmeg 2.71% in Ethyl Alcohol, but the product no longer bears the Eichorn name.²

Eichorn’s main market was at the fairs and shows in the small country towns of New South Wales and Queensland.³

Like a true showman, whenever Eichorn rode into town, he wore a special vest adorned with medals all over his chest from “grateful” people he claimed to have cured of many common diseases including Abrasions, Boils and Carbuncles to Blackheads and Spongy Gums. His catch cry was “there is help in every drop.”

Although he earned a living selling his Remedy, Eichorn, like all bush-men was always aware of the dangers of snake bite and he spent much of his life trying to find an anti-venom from native plants as the Aboriginals apparently had been able to do.

Success with natural materials from the bush eluded him, but from his experiences with handling some of the most dangerous snakes in Australia, he claimed that he had devised a means of treating victims of their bites, as a result of observation and trial and error.



Australian Red Bellied Black Snake. *Pseudechis porphyacus*³

One day whilst roaming through the bush his horse was bitten by a Red Bellied Black Snake. The horse promptly threw its rider and then galloped off into a water-hole where it resisted all attempts to persuade it to get out.



Tiger Snake *Notechis scutata*⁴

In another incident, his dog was bitten by a Tiger Snake and it too made straight for water. Eichorn explained this by saying that instinctively animals bitten by snakes sought water either to escape another attack or for a long drink which may dilute the venom.

He tested his theory using rabbits and other animals and then ultimately he allowed himself to be bitten by a venomous snake and then jumping into a pool of water. Apart from feeling a little dizzy he recovered sufficiently to proclaim that by keeping body temperature down, the effects of the snake bite could be nullified.

Eichorn reasoned that once a victim is bitten, the venom begins to crystallise in the blood and the tiny crystals blocked the heart. By keeping a snake bite victim cool the chances of survival were much greater than if the temperature of the victim is raised by excitement or drinking stimulants.

This treatment is still recognised as an important part of treating a venomous bite, although anti-venene injections prepared from horse serum, are available from major hospitals around the country.

Snake venoms have very large molecules and they cannot be neutralised by any known natural or synthetic product. The ability of the Mongoose to kill venomous snakes is well known and many attempts have been made to find a natural antibody to the snake's poison in this small animal, but nothing has come of this research so far.

To promote the sales of his remedy Eichorn adopted the tactics of the quacks of the old world and he drew the crowds to see him demonstrate his method of treating a snake bite.

He would allow a live snake to latch onto his arm and then he would plunge the limb into a container of cold water. When his arm was removed from the water he showed no signs of envenomation from the bite.

In his heyday August Eichorn became quite a celebrity and he was known as the “Snake King of Upper Adelong”.

Albert Eichorn and his theory cannot be dismissed as quackery altogether, as lowering body core temperature is often used during major surgery today. Maybe his observations will open the door for medical science to further benefit mankind.

The SECOND product I am going to talk about today is called Goanna Salve.



Goanna Salve

This product is one of the earliest examples of the use of animal fat in an Australian “cure all” It was manufactured and marketed in Queensland around 1910, under the brand name **“Goanna Salve”**.

The base for Goanna Salve was made from the fat of the common bush reptile, the Goanna, one of the many species of Monitor Lizards that inhabit all parts of Australia



Blue tongued Bobtail Goanna
*. Tiliqua rugosa*⁵

The use of animal fat for medicinal purposes is not new and it was part of the materia medica of the Ancient Greeks. They produced a universal panacea which contained viper flesh amongst its myriad of ingredients. There are many other examples from bygone days and two that stand out are Bears Grease and Holloway’s Ointment.

The discoverer of this “miraculous” remedy was J.C.Marconi who worked as a puppeteer in a travelling vaudeville troupe that followed the outback country fairs in northern New South Wales and Queensland as had August Eichorn. One day he chanced upon an aboriginal man rubbing goanna fat on a snakebite wound which aroused his curiosity.

He studied the Aborigines’ process and learned how they removed the fat from the animal and mixed it with native aromatic oils to create a wonder salve to soothe their aches and pains. Marconi created his version of the aboriginal formula and commenced manufacturing **Goanna Liniment** and **Goanna Salve** in his home laundry.



J.C. Marconi ⁶

The exact ingredients of Marconi's original wonder salve have remained a secret and they are as mysterious as the story of the man who made it.

Manufacturing and selling these types of products was no easy task and as it was with the quacks of the old world, a real “attention grabber” was the secret to success



On one occasion Marconi heard a story from a fellow sideshow performer in which he claimed that he had discovered an antidote to snake venom.

Marconi befriended this man, Lyn Vane, and he showed Marconi how the Aboriginals made a decoction from some secret native plants, which was taken orally.

Vane was so confident about his discovery that he developed an act in which he allowed himself to be bitten by a deadly snake and then after swallowing some of the plant decoction, surprising the audience with his “amazing recovery”⁷.

This performance by Vane drew crowds wherever he went and Marconi seized the opportunity to promote his Goanna Oil products by appearing together with Vane.

Sales of Goanna Salve grew rapidly and Marconi, like Thomas Holloway before him, advertised widely and printed testimonials in newspapers with eye-catching headlines such as "Man's Legs Saved", "Nasal Catarrh Cured" and so on.

Marconi made a fortune during the First World War, as many people sent tins of Goanna Salve in parcels for their loved ones fighting overseas.

It was claimed that a tin of Marconi’s Goanna Salve was as welcome in the trenches as a hip flask of scotch. Diggers used it to fix their piles, their foot sores and lubricate their guns.

Any Goanna that died between 1914 and 1918, Marconi said, “*died for its country*”.

In the early 1900s Marconi was able to obtain an abundance of Goanna Salve's key ingredient by enlisting the help of children across Queensland who were perpetually on the lookout for goannas, the fat of which was cut out of the reptile, placed on sheets of iron in the sun, melted into bottles, and posted to Marconi for a princely sum. In northern Australia, Monitor Lizards can grow to more than 2 meters in length, and that means a lot of fat !



Spotted Monitor, *Varanus panoples*

It has been decades since Goanna Salve actually contained any goanna fat. Today's salve is made from eucalyptus oil, pine oil, peppermint oil, camphor, menthol and turpentine and the product comes in a little glass jar as you can see.

Marconi died in 1922 when he was the victim of an unlucky blow in a bar room skirmish. His family sold the rights to Goanna Salve to a pharmaceutical manufacturer and with it the stipulation that the name "J.C. Marconi" must appear on every jar.

There are a number of fascinating common links between the stories of Eichorn and Marconi and the society of their times.

They were both showmen with a product to sell and they also promoted their sales with the well tried techniques of the quack medicine vendors. Eichorn and Vane both attracted their audiences with theatricals, but interestingly they did not appear to sell their snake bite treatments as such.

Maybe the market for their more miraculous cures was more profitable !

Who said there are no Kangaroos in Austria ?



¹ Cited in R.Porter, *Health for Sale: quackery in England 1660-1850*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989, p3

² Martyr Philipa, *Paradise of Quacks*. 2002. MacLeay Press. Paddington NSW.

³ Cited in www.warringah.nsw.gov.au/environment/fauna_4.aspx 12/05/2009

⁴ Cited in www.tigersnakes.com.au/tiger_snakes_pics/tiger_snake.jpg 12/05/2009

⁵ Cited in [www.http://scarboro.info/pix/environment/goanna.jpg](http://scarboro.info/pix/environment/goanna.jpg) 12/05/2009

⁶ Marconi family records

⁷ Low, Tim., *Bush Medicine, A Pharmacopoeia of Natural Remedies*.. Angus & Robertson. Sydney NSW , 1990