

## THE UNIVERSAL PANACEA: CHICKEN SOUP



An editorial written by eminent cardiologist Joseph S. Alpert that appeared in the December 2023 issue of the *American Journal of Medicine* extolled the virtues of chicken soup. I've reproduced the delightful article below, but it reminded me of something that I wrote (but didn't publish) on the same subject back in 1976. It was called "Let Them Drink Soup" and I'll begin with a few extracts from that epic:

"The twelfth century theologian and physician Moses Maimonides wrote, "Chicken soup...is recommended as an excellent food as well as medication...In 1633, [when] the great English physician William Harvey treated the Prince of Wales, the three year old son of King Charles, who was suffering from severe colic and blood flecked stools, he wrote "Then we did resolve first upon some clysters of milk to refresh his intestines and usage his pain and, thereafter, we appointed the same more deterrentive with the broth of a chicken."

Famed cardiologist George Burch observed that soup is an ideal and truly physiologic fluid of great therapeutic value: "the results are astounding and the patient is impressed....[but] admittedly such therapy is usually less impressive to the patient's family than an intravenous drip." Dr. Burch didn't distinguish between the relative merits of varieties of soup, e.g. bouillabaisse or cream of tomato, but folklorists since ancient times have remarked on the unique properties of chicken soup.

It's notable in this regard that the dietary injunctions given to Moses on Mount Sinai, while restricting consumption of no less than 19 types of fowl, exempted chicken from prohibition. Chicken soup may contain a number of substances with beneficial medicinal activity including an anti-inflammatory mechanism that could ease the symptoms of upper respiratory tract infections, but in 1975, when a published case report from the Presbyterian University Hospital in Pittsburgh described "an inadequate course of chicken soup" in treatment of pneumonia, it provoked a spate of replies that included the following:

"Us chicken-soupers have long been aware of the therapeutic efficacy of chicken soup. Our data, however, has consistently been ignored by the bulk of organized medical opinion whose practitioners...are predominantly affluent steak eaters." — ChickenSoup Institute of Philadelphia."

A Mayo Clinic urologist reported on his research with a chicken byproduct which he suggested might cure impotence and premature ejaculation. This physician complained that he was unable to carry out a prospective, randomized study since volunteers refused to participate unless they were assured that they would be subjects rather than controls.

A letter from the Mount Sinai Hospital in New York questioned whether physicians from a Presbyterian hospital could appreciate and understand the laboratory methods well enough concerning the bioavailability and pharmacologic properties of chicken soup.

A Boston cardiologist observed that while interviewing medical school applicants, he often refreshed himself in a small kitchenette adjacent to his office that contained hot water, tea bags, instant coffee and powdered soups. On one occasion he had switched from instant coffee to powdered chicken soup to sip during the interview and when the next applicant entered the office, he sniffed, looked around, spotted the cup of chicken soup in these august premises and blurted out, "My God, it's true!"

What follows next is Dr. Alpert's recent editorial in the American Journal of Medicine:

"One of my favorite lectures is entitled "All the things they taught me in medical school and before that have turned out not to be true." Examples abound, including the concept that eradicating premature ventricular contractions with antiarrhythmic

drugs in a patient with heart disease prevents sudden death. Or, one of my mother's favorites: don't go swimming for an hour after you eat because this could cause stomach cramps and result in drowning! The first assertion has been clearly debunked by randomized controlled trials and extensive data from registries. The second assertion has not been studied, but I have never heard of a real-life example of this bizarre admonition. In the middle of my lecture on false things that I was taught, there is a humorous slide showing a bowl of chicken soup with the title "Chicken soup cures all illnesses, especially if prepared by a loved one." I do not believe that a randomized, double-blind study on the efficacy of chicken soup to cure, or at least ameliorate, all illnesses exists; however, I am still convinced that it is true!

Tonight, I found myself thinking about the topic of chicken soup while enjoying 2 bowls of my spouse's version—a nutritional hybrid of Eastern and Western cuisine, containing chopped Chinese cabbage, onions, peas, sliced ginger, and bay leaves, along with, of course, cooked rice and bones with some meat from left over roasted chicken. Over many years of travelling, my wife and I have enjoyed many different versions of chicken soup while visiting various parts of the globe: China, Denmark, France, Argentina, Mexico, the Caribbean, Russia, Lithuania, and other countries. Chicken soup is enjoyed throughout the world.

Given the widespread consumption of chicken soup, I decided to perform a literature search on the internet, PubMed, and Amazon to see if any information were available concerning the curative properties of this globally enjoyed dish. The results were remarkable. A Google search brought up many pages of references including a Wikipedia article with the following information:

Chicken soup is ... made from chicken, simmered in water, usually with various other ingredients. The classic chicken soup consists of a clear chicken broth, often with pieces of chicken or vegetables; common additions are pasta, noodles, dumplings, or grains such as rice and barley. Chicken soup has acquired the reputation of a folk remedy for colds and influenza, and in many countries is considered a comfort food. Humans were already boiling food by the time chicken was domesticated in the neolithic period, so it is likely that chickens were being boiled for soup at that time. Modern American chicken soup, which typically includes root vegetables such as carrot, onion, leeks and celery, was a staple across Northern Europe and was brought to the United States by immigrants.

The Wikipedia article contains descriptions of various forms of chicken soup from 24 different countries on every continent except Australia and Antarctica. Nevertheless, I am sure the Aussies also enjoy chicken soup, as do scientists working in research entities on the icy continent who consume hot chicken soup with pleasure!

Campbell's American canned chicken soup was made famous throughout the world by Andy Warhol's painting of this widely consumed entity. The question concerning chicken soup's medicinal qualities has been extensively discussed in the popular media. However, there are few scientific observations to support the widespread belief that chicken soup has beneficial medicinal effects.

A PubMed search of the term “chicken soup” returned 206 references with many referring to work done at the University of Nebraska Medical Center published in *Chest* in 2000.<sup>7</sup> This laboratory investigation found that chicken soup inhibited neutrophil migration and hence may be anti-inflammatory. Other investigators disputed the findings, and there were many letters to the editor following the publication of the Nebraska study—some serious and others tongue-in-cheek. A review of Amazon books involving the topic of chicken soup returned more than 4000 entries with many of the texts written for children. It seems clear that the next generation is already being indoctrinated to love chicken soup whether it has medicinal properties or not.

My conclusion remains the same as [much of what] I was taught that turned out not to be true: chicken soup has physical and particularly psychological beneficial effects in humans, especially when prepared by a loved one. I always have a great sense of well-being after finishing a bowl of my spouse's chicken soup!

Or grandma's - see above.

M.Nevins

Comment from Dr. Joseph S. Alpert: “Fantastic and superb!”