

People dropped whisky into their noses to treat Spanish flu. Here's what else they took that would raise eyebrows today

September 20 2021, by Philippa Martyr



Credit: Min An from Pexels

We're researching COVID-19 in a fast-paced world with new data becoming available all the time. We track which interventions work well and which ones don't.

But in 1918, during the Spanish flu pandemic, the world was a different place. No one was entirely sure [what caused influenza](#). By the time health authorities began to find out, it was too late.

Our knowledge about viruses was limited in 1918, but we knew about bacteria. People who died of flu had bacterial infection in their lungs. However, [this threw researchers off track](#) because these were [secondary infections](#), not caused directly by the flu.

With this lack of knowledge, it was still an anything-goes medical research world. There were [unregulated vaccine trials](#) and lots of hype for the latest "[cure](#)," even in respectable medical journals.

More than 100 years on, controversial "cures" for COVID-19, such as ivermectin, are making the headlines, being reported in medical journals and are being promoted by [doctors](#) and [politicians](#).

Here's what we know about the Spanish flu "cures" of the day, whisky included.

Doctors, pharmacists and nurses had cures

Doctors developed and used some of these cures for the flu. Sydney's chief quarantine officer, Dr. Reid, [treated patients](#) in March 1919 with 15-grain (1 gram) doses of calcium lactate every four hours, and a "vaccine" containing influenza and pneumococcus bacteria. In 203 cases, he had no deaths.

Calcium lactate is used today to treat [low levels of calcium in the blood](#). But Dr. Reid's doses are well above the current recommended daily level.

[Chemists were also busy](#) making and selling [their own influenza cures](#). J.

Reginald Albert McAlister of Guyra in regional New South Wales advertised his 1919 patented mixture as [curing influenza at once](#).

How to Get Strong 4 days after the FLU

Miraculous Success of the New **BONOX** Method

After the "Flu" or any other disease it's impossible for the digestive organs to get enough nourishment out of your food to make you strong. That's why people linger after having the epidemic "Flu." That's why so many apparently recover from the "Flu" and then die of sheer weakness and other complications ensuing. These conditions can now be rapidly overcome by the new "BONOX" method. "BONOX" is predigested fluid beef food, made by a special secret process which is capitalized at £50,000. "BONOX," being digested before you take it, and being concentrated food, medicated and peptonized in fluid form, turns into rich red blood almost immediately after you take it. It makes you strong—gives you back your hope, your confidence and courage. It fills you with optimism and good cheer. It stimulates you by its food value, and not by artificial means—thus you don't slip back. "BONOX" is the greatest triumph of the food chemist ever discovered. Invalids who have been lingering for years have been restored to sound physical health by "BONOX." "BONOX" saves little babies' lives. It makes them strong. They love it too.



PRE-DIGESTED FOOD

“Bonox” Absolutely Cures Indigestion and Brain Fag

Lassitude and Weariness without drugs and other worthless stimulants. It starts you on the new way to health on a solid foundation. It's the duty of every nursing mother to take "BONOX" for her health's sake—and baby's sake. The thoughtful husband who takes home a bottle of "BONOX" for use in case of sickness, or for use in the kitchen, or perhaps for baby, renders a service to his household, the beneficial effects of which are too great to be estimated. "BONOX" in the home means insurance against disease. It absolutely prevents Spanish Influenza by building up your bodily resistance, and supplying the white corpuscles of your blood with nourishment so that they can fight any disease which comes along. "BONOX" men and women are healthy men and women. Office girls who take "BONOX" instead of tea rapidly show the beneficial effects by the increased elasticity of their step, their physical vigour, and their keen and alert mental attitude. One thing that should be in every home, in every factory, in every school, is "BONOX."

This Bonox advertisement promised a robust recovery. Credit: Trove Digitised Newspapers, Herald (Melbourne), April 26, 1919, p9, National Library of Australia

People even listened to nurses—who at the time were usually the [least important people in the health-care system](#)—about cures for the Spanish flu.

Nan Taylor, a New Zealand nurse, [advocated](#) whisky—lots of it, including gargling and drops up the nose. She also recommended quinine and castor oil.

Nurse Kate Guazzini cared for Spanish flu patients in South Africa in late 1918, and caught the flu there before moving to Sydney. She [said](#):

"I was kept alive on brandy and milk for six weeks [...] That, with quinine and hot lemon drinks, were found to be the only effective remedies."

Food manufacturers linked themselves to flu cures. In 1919 a [brand new beef extract](#), Bonox, had just hit the Australian market, and the flu epidemic was a great marketing opportunity. [Bonox was advertised](#) as a sure way to recover your health and strength after the flu.

News of 'cures' spread far and wide

In much of Australia just after WWI [there were often no doctors close by](#). So many people were used to dosing themselves with [homemade potions and remedies](#). They shared their prescriptions in the pages of local newspapers.

Between 1918 and 1920, Australian newspapers were flooded with Spanish flu cures of all kinds.

In October 1918, a journalist at Victoria's Bendigo Independent [lamented](#): "Cures? My goodness me, the vast amount of cures on the market are positively frightening, and everyone has a favorite cure. I pin my faith to one, you to another. There's a certain influenza mixture that, taken in the early stages, is regarded as a certain cure by one large section [...] Asperin [sic] is the cry of another batch of victims, and they tell you that that drug does the trick. 'Try whiskey and milk taken hot and taken often,' is the advice of others who have had it. But one and all end in the same way: 'Go to bed and stay there till the thing leaves you.'"

Aspirin was very popular as a Spanish flu treatment worldwide. But people sometimes took it at dangerously high doses, [which may have boosted the number of deaths attributed to the flu](#).

THERE'S NO NEED to CATCH the 'FLU this WINTER



They do not
affect the
heart

Aspro
WILL STOP IT

The 'Flu is about again. That isn't any reason why you should catch it, though, because a way has been discovered to stop it. The way is "Aspro" Tablets—the remedy that was proclaimed a necessary commodity by the Commonwealth Government during the Spanish influenza epidemic. As soon as you feel a bit dopey—or if your temperature rises—or a headache

Aspro advertising, Telegraph (Qld), 30 July 1921, page 14. Credit: Trove Digitised Newspapers, National Library of Australia

In the absence of many other treatments, government authorities [promoted aspirin](#), along with [quinine and phenacetin](#).

The pain killer [phenacetin](#) is now banned because it's linked to [kidney and urinary tract cancers](#).

Like aspirin, [its overuse might have boosted](#) the Spanish flu death rate.

They're using it in America

Like today, Australians were also eagerly reading about overseas experiments, and wanting to try these cures locally.

In June 1919, the Richmond River Herald [reported](#): "On Friday we published the following New York cable:—Dr. Charles Duncan, at the Convention of the American Medical Association, said the cure for influenza was one drachm of infected mucus pasteurized and with filtered water injected subcutaneously ... Yesterday (says Tuesday's Tweed 'Daily') a youth was seen inquiring for a chemist, having in his hand the above clipping and sixpence, his object being to secure that amount's worth of the 'cure.' Several others, it is understood, have also been inquiring into the same matter, with a view to 'having it made up' locally."

Some of these cures lingered

Once the Spanish flu pandemic was over, many of the cures remained.

Most of them, like aspirin, incorporated the threat of influenza [into regular advertising](#).

Some, [like quinine](#), have made a reappearance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

And one of the most commonly recommended cures—[whisky taken at frequent intervals](#)—[hasn't lost its popularity](#).

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