

Effective Medicine in Small Doses

By Dr Seah Chiew Wan, Editorial Board Member

1 Consulting skills - The patient who refuses the right treatment

John Murtagh believes it is more appropriate to say difficult problems rather than difficult patients –afterall it is the patients who have the problems while doctors have the difficulties. One of the common problems we face as a family doctor is when a patient refuses to be referred for right treatment when indicated. This was further aggravated with the recent SARS scare in hospitals. You are asked to do a house call. It is a diabetic patient insisting on antibiotics and regular dressing for his foot gangrene. One look and you know short of a miracle, no amount of antibiotics and dressing is going to bring about healing. He needs to be referred to the orthopaedic surgeon for a likely below knee amputation. Sounds familiar? What would you do? Would you prescribe a course of antibiotics and make regular home visits to dress his wounds? Or maybe refer him to Home Care Services for home nursing care? Or simply stick to your gun, refuse his request for treatment and leave?



TIP. A few tested options are:

- Provide a short trial of treatment. Time itself is a management tool and allows the patient to see poor progress as well as keeping him on your side. A joint decision can be made for referral later.
- Decide not to provide any definitive treatment but write a memo detailing your assessment and advice on management. This gives family the option to seek appropriate medical attention when they change their mind and as a family doctor you eased the process by providing a letter for continuity of care.

2 Rules of prescription - Ever wondered just how much cream is enough?



TIP. Here are some simple rules to go by:

- 30 gm of cream will cover the surface area of an adult. Ointments, despite being of thicker consistency, do not penetrate into the deeper skin layers so readily and the requirements are slightly less.
- For small lesions:

1 gm of cream will cover an area approximately 10 cm x 10 cm

- For large lesions:

the 'rule of nines' (See Fig. 1), used routinely to determine the percentage of body surface area affected by burns, may also be used to calculate the amount of a topical preparation that needs to be prescribed. 3 gm of cream will cover 9% of the body surface area.

3 Elderly health- Handling dry eyes in the elderly with style



Elderly patient complaints to you of excessive watery eyes .

TIP. Before you blithely diagnose dry eyes and prescribe eye drops, explain to patient the reason as the he may wonder why he is being prescribed more eyedrops when he is already producing so much tears.

Simply, there are 2 types of tear production:

- Basic tear secretion, which is unconscious, lubricates the eye and allows the eyelids to glide smoothly across the cornea.
- Reflex tear secretion is tearing in response to stimuli for example irritants in the eyes and during emotional states.

In the elderly, loss of basic tear production occurs and the resulting eye irritation triggers the reflex secretion. Hence the paradoxical complaint of excessive watery eyes. Then explain that treatment is simple - instillation of topical ocular lubricants four times daily or more, depending on severity. Many commercial tear substitutes (like methycellulose eye drops) are available in the market and the individual patient may find a particular type most suitable for him. Some patients prefer gels. Surgery e.g. punctal occlusion is reserved for refractory cases.

4 Curry Leaves- a safe and economical way to treat Halitosis

Halitosis affects 50-65% of population. In the majority, bad breath originates from local factors with 10% due to systemic diseases. The bad breath is due to volatile sulphur compounds produced by bacteria in mouth.

Increase in saliva production through use of breath mints, lozenges and adequate water intake at regular intervals decreases the concentration of bacteria and helps in cleaning of oral cavity. Regular teeth brushing in morning and after dinner improves oral hygiene and controls bacteria in oral cavity.

TIP. Curry leaves are easily found in gardens and used in local Asian cooking. Holding two fresh curry leaves in mouth for 7 minutes has been found to decrease bad breath. The curry leaves increases the flow of saliva and contain sesquiterpenes which are essential oils with antibacterial and antifungal properties.

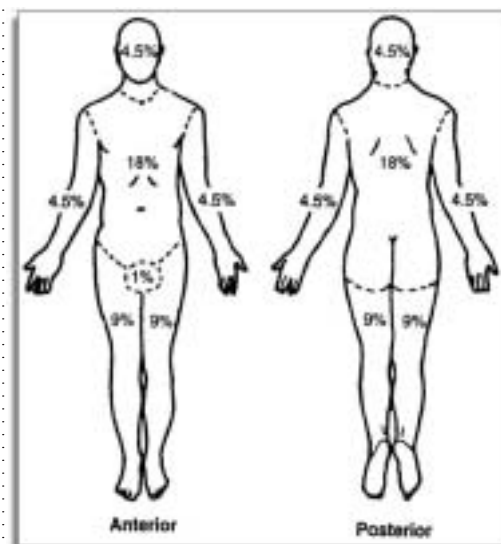


Figure 1. 'Rule of nines' for body surface area

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1. General Practice 2nd edition John Murtagh Chapter 99 Problems of the skin
2. Geriatric medicine for Singapore, Law NM, Chapter 21 Visual impairment
3. Mahantayya et al Curry leaves and Halitosis BMJ South Asia Edition May 2003; Vol. 19 No.3 ; 211