Cupping: an alternative therapeutic method used by Hippocratic physicians

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Abstract

Cupping is a therapeutic method dating back to early antiquity. The method ensures the restoration of the distortion of the body fluids especially when accompanied by scarification. References to its use may be found in the Ebers papyrus (1550 B.C.), in one of the “iamata” of the Asklepieion at Lebena, Crete, in Herodotus’s Histories, and, of course, in the Hippocratic Corpus. The Hippocratic physicians provide us with lengthy and exhaustive descriptions of the application of cups, along with the preparations preceding cupping, and indications and contra-indications of the method. They describe the use of cups for gynecological purposes, earaches, affections and pain in the extremities, infections from contaminated water, sciatica, angina, tonsillitis, erysipelas in the lungs, and eye diseases. The practice survived till the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th; some primitive tribes continue to use them today.
Introduction

Cupping is one of the oldest medical practices. The Ebers papyrus (1550 B.C.) mentions its use for the removal of foreign matter from the body [1]. The cupping instruments of the Egyptians were conical in shape with a hole at their peak, where the physician applied his mouth and drew out the air, applying the instrument firmly to the skin [2]. In ancient Greece, the reason for using cups was the removal of excessive blood from the organism; scarification was thus often used in conjunction with cups. The early use of cupping instruments in Greece is documented on one of the “iamata” of the Asklepieion at Lebena, Crete, where a woman who could not conceive went; while she was asleep, the god put into practice cupping and the woman became pregnant [3]. Prosper Alpinus (16th century) quotes Herodotus as regards the use of cups with the aid of scarification: “scarification, with cupping, possesses the power of evacuating offending matter from the head; of diminishing pain of the same part, of relieving inflammation; of restoring appetite; of strengthening a weak stomach; of removing vertigo and the tendency to faint; of drawing deep-seated offending matter towards the surface; of drying up fluxions; of checking hemorrhages; of promoting menstrual evacuations; of arresting the tendency to putrefaction in fevers; of allaying rigors; of accelerating and moderating the crisis of diseases; of removing a propensity to somnolence; of conciliating natural repose, and of removing heaviness. These, along with other similar maladies, are relieved by the judicious application of cups, dry or bloody” [4]. But it is the Hippocratic physicians who provide us with the longest and most exhaustive descriptions of the application of cups, along with the preparations preceding cupping, and indications or contraindications for this method.
General information on the use of cups provided in the Hippocratic Corpus

According to the Hippocratic physicians, there are two types of cups, used according to the disease. The first type is an instrument slightly convex, with a small, round mouth and a long, light handle. The second one has a larger, round mouth. The first type is generally used when there is accumulation of fluid far from the superficial tissue, because the shape of this cup attracts “in a straight line and draws the dispersed sera up nicely towards the tissue”. The second type of cups is used when pain has spread throughout the tissues, because “it draws the diseased material from as many parts as possible to the place where it should be”. If, against instructions, the instrument is heavy, it presses on the upper structures, whereas fluid should be removed from the lower structures, and the diseased materials are often left behind. The second type is also used in cases where fluxes are blocked in the inner structures; cups then attract more material from the rest of the tissues, so it appears that the moisture drawn from the superficial tissues stands in the way of the serum collected from below [5]. The Hippocratic physicians associate the ability of broad and tapering cups to attract blood with bodily parts displaying a similar shape: “there are many other instruments of a similar nature”. “Of the parts within the human frame, the bladder, the head, and the womb are of this structure. These obviously attract powerfully, and are always full of a fluid from without” [6].

The size of cups that should be used depends on the bodily part needing their application, i.e. cups used on the back are larger than cups used on the head. As for scarification accompanying cupping, the blood should be taken from inner and not from superficial structures. The scalpels used for the scarification of the skin should be curved, not too pointed, because sometimes the serum that comes out is sticky and thick [5]. After the removal of the cup, if blood and serum keep flowing, the physician
should quickly reapply the instrument to the same place; otherwise clots will form in the incisions, and after that “inflamed lesions” will arise. Such lesions should be cleaned with vinegar and then left to dry while anointing them with vinegar or other styptic substance [7].

**Different uses of cupping**

The Hippocratic physicians prescribe the use of cups on women in two cases: in the case of uterine prolapse and for postponing menstruation. In the first case, a very large cup has to be applied to the hip of the woman; the instrument should be left to suck for a long period of time, but after its removal, no incision should take place. Instead, the woman should remain lying in her bed [8]. In the second case, a cup of the largest size should be applied to the woman’s breasts [9].

Cups are also proposed for the lower extremities. If the inner thigh of the leg is aching without an accumulation of pus, cups should be applied and scarifications performed [10]. Furthermore, the Hippocratic physicians suggest that when cups have to be applied to or below the knee, the patient should be standing up if possible [7]. Generally, though, if swelling appears in any other joint and does not improve, application of cups together with scarifications will be very helpful [11]. Furthermore, the immediate application of cups after the first appearance of pain in the extremities guarantees alleviation of pain and a better course for the illness [12].

In the Hippocratic texts cups are also prescribed in the case of sciatica. The instruments should be applied, without however making any punctures, in order to withdraw fluid. The patient should be prepared for this kind of treatment: he should be heated internally by drinking “warming medications”. This is necessary “in order that there will be both an exit externally into the skin by the drawing of the cupping
instrument, and an exit internally into the cavity brought about by the heating”. This is important since, according to the Hippocratic physicians, when the fluid is blocked and “has nowhere else to go”, it goes to the joints, flowing in the direction of least resistance and thus causing sciatica [5].

Cupping is also believed to be helpful in the case of swollen uvula caused by the accumulation of phlegm, when it pours down in quantity out of the head. Gargles should first be prescribed and only if the swelling does not improve should cups be used. The back of the head should first be shaved and two cups should be applied there to remove as much blood as possible. If the uvula does not return to its normal state after that, an incision should be performed with a knife, in order to release accumulated fluid [13].

The Hippocratic physicians also prescribe cupping in cases of “angina”. If a patient suffers from fever, chills, pain in the head, swollen throat and jaws, and is unable to swallow his thick and plentiful saliva [14], a cup should be applied to the first vertebra of his neck, after his head has been shaved beside the ears on either side; after the cup has been attached firmly to the site, it should be left there as long as possible [14].

Cups are also used for the treatment of ear ailments, even in cases of a simple earache [15]. If there is painful flux to the ears, a cup should be applied behind the ear. If the pain is in the left ear, the cup should be applied on the right side and if the pain is in the right ear, then it should be applied on the left side. No incisions are necessary, since the benefit from the cup alone is enough [5].

The Hippocratic Corpus also refers to the application of cups in the case of “erysipelas in the lung”. Cups should then be applied “if the pain withdraws beneath the shoulder-blades”, along with an incision to the vessels of the arms [14]. Finally,
the physicians describe a disease occurring mainly in the summer due to the consumption of water and from oversleeping. In this case, the critical period of thirty days determines whether the patient will die or not. If the patient survives, the physician should draw blood from his loins with the aid of a cup and make an incision to the widest vessels of the scrotum. This method can ensure a speedy recovery [11].

Nevertheless, there is one contraindication for the application of cups. This is the case of a fall or a heavy weight that has caused an inward curvature of the vertebrae, in which the application of large cup is considered a great mistake, because instead of achieving depression of the vertebrae, it causes further dislocation. Thus, the larger the instrument applied, the hollower one’s back becomes, since “the skin is drawn together and upwards” [16].

Discussion

Hippocratic medicine is based on the theory of the “four humours” (blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile); their balance in the human organism ensures the preservation of health, while the disruption of their analogies results in disease. The physician’s role is either to try to preserve the existing balance or to restore it, by advising the removal of the excessive humour [17]. A common method of bloodletting – in the cases of blood excess – was cupping performed together with scarifications in order to withdraw blood from the congested underlying tissues [18]. Another use was to attract and move structures dislocated from their initial position, such as in the case of uterine prolapse, by acting mechanically. It was probably thought that, just as cups “attract” blood, they could attract and move any other structure [8]. We should note here that in Hippocrates’ time the uterus was a structure not believed to be attached to any other structure in the body and was able to move
freely, even as far as the thoracic cavity. Thus, it was probably considered possible to easily move this uterus.

The technique of applying cups is extensively described in the Hippocratic texts according to their shape and size, the width of their mouth and the kind of disease. In some cases cupping is performed only to attract the blood to the surface of the body (dry cupping) and to some other cases cupping is accompanied by scarification. The duration of application is also defined, but normally the advisable period is simply “a long time” [8].

The shapes and properties of cups are compared to the inner structures of the body such as the bladder, the head, and the womb. Probably the ability of the womb to retain the fetus, of the bladder to retain urine, and of the head to retain saliva and nasal secretions led the Hippocratic physicians to generalize and attribute similar properties to cups. In this sense the intestines, the spleen, the breast, the lungs etc. were mentioned in order to explain the inability of other shapes of bodily structures to withdraw and retain any content [6].

There are many indications for the use of cups. The Hippocratic physicians use them in the cases of uterine prolapse, or to control menstruation. They are also used in cases of earache (dry cupping behind the ear) [15], for bilious people (dry cupping), for accidents, infections and pain in the leg, for arthritis or any swelling of the joints, for infection from drinking water, for sciatica (dry cupping) [5], for angina, for swollen uvula (tonsilitis), for erysipelas in the lungs (incision of the vessels of the arms) [14], and for “ophthalmia”, an eye disease (application to the veins) [19]. However, there are also instances in which the use of cups may have adverse results, such as that of the inward curvature of the vertebrae in cases of accident [16].
Finally, one should note that while cupping is viewed today as a panacea characteristic of antiquity, it remained in use until the introduction of antibiotics and chemotherapy [20] and, as was mentioned above, primitive societies still employ this therapeutic technique today.
References


