

Author's Note

I had never heard of Royal Copeland until his name turned up in some preliminary research I did after someone suggested to me that I look into the power struggle between conventional and alternative medicine in America. Eventually, I discovered that he was the person to use to tell the story I was uncovering, a war story that focused on homeopathy, the controversial alternative with definite rules of usage that had been developed in the West and used around the world for nearly two hundred years.

There has never been a biography of Copeland—a doctor, surgeon, homeopath, mayor, dean, commissioner, and senator—except for an unpublished PhD thesis completed in the late 1960s. This unusual man, who helped change medical culture in the states of Michigan and New York, and who championed his beliefs until they were written into a historically important federal law, deserves a full and comprehensive biography. This doesn't pretend to be that book; in fact, it is more a "biography" of homeopathy than of Royal Copeland. My intention from the beginning was to draw only upon the parts of his life that dramatized the life of conventional medicine (also frequently called "standard," "mainstream," "regular," or "traditional" medicine) and homeopathy. Until I began this book, I'm not even sure I knew what homeopathy was. No doctor had ever suggested I use it, nor had anyone else I knew. But as often happens in such cases, soon after I decided to write about it, I started to hear neighbors and friends mention the sometimes odd, very dilute, remedies they often said "changed their lives." Their stories intrigued me. One neighbor, a newspaper reporter, told me that her two children, a daughter now twelve and a son sixteen, had never needed an antibiotic. She had always given them homeopathic remedies, especially one called Belladonna, made from the poisonous Deadly Nightshade plant, or "Devil's Herb," for ear infections. "It takes the pain right away, and my children have never had to get in the antibiotic and ear tube cycle," she explained. Another neighbor, a young lawyer with three daughters (ages six, nine, and twelve), first treated their ear infections with antibiotics, until she said, "I wised up." One remedy she gave for their colds was *Allium cepa*, made from a red onion. (She told me also that her husband's father was brought up by a mother who, at the onset of a cold, urged him to eat half an onion with hot water.) Both mothers said they wished they could convert the whole world to homeopathy. How could an alternative often dismissed as the "no medicine medicine" still be in such favor? What does this say about science-based, conventional medicine? What does this mean in the twenty-first century? I decided to try to find out.

The method of action of most standard medications is often pretty much known, or understood on some cellular level, and they all have had extensive clinical studies performed on them, studies done not only at well-known research and medical centers, but studies that have been peer-reviewed, published in standard professional journals, and regulated by the Food and Drug Administration. But the method of action of homeopathic remedies is generally not known, very few of the remedies have gone through extensive clinical studies, and scientific proof is only a distant possibility. But this was changing, I discovered, because many modern homeopaths say they are performing clinical trials with the same discipline used by standard doctors.

In my writing (and life), I always want the two or more sides of every issue to be taken into account, counted, and accounted for. I want evenhanded, balanced deliberations about all things, especially those that are considered controversial. I want to hear and analyze and understand the debates. Maybe I am asking the impossible. Maybe, as Wallace Sampson, MD, a leading skeptic of alternative medicine wrote me in an e-mail, there can be no “even-handed” approach to homeopathy, which, he said, “was not developed through rational, scientific channels.” He went on to semi-mock me and say that “the equivalent [*of homeopathy*] in other fields would be Robbery in America or Embezzlement in America— even-handed, so we understand the mind of the embezzler—the rationale, the needs, the social justification, people who benefit from it. Analyze the pros and cons of laws against it from both sides—the dominant political authorities’ hegemony over the embezzling communities, and the monopoly of the banking and business communities.” He told me to “compare the businesses that run on laws and rules, ethics and professional standards as balanced as possible with the embezzling business. Explain the reasons for each’s existence. Or better, one on alternative physics . . . free energy, zero energy devices such as energy from gravity and static magnets, perpetual motion machines, cold fusion devices. Those are the physical and economic equals of ‘alternative’ medicine.”

Jennifer Jacobs, MD, one of the doctors featured in the last three chapters along with Michael Carlston, MD, writes that “homeopathy is essentially a method of applying drugs. These are drugs, however, that work with the body. These are medicines with eyes and ears.” Carlston adds that “homeopathy’s most unique capability is to alleviate chronic illness, because treatment of chronic illness is conventional medicine’s greatest weakness.”

Conventional vs. Alternative.

Here’s what I hope is a fair-minded story about their battles.

Prologue

The knives that were once used by doctors to drain blood from the bodies of men, women, and children were folding, triple-bladed instruments with bone handles and highly polished sheaths. Or they were brass spring-loaded twelve-to-twenty-bladed tools that made quick punctures. Sometimes a wooden stick was tapped on the top of the blade handle to help push it into a vein. Always nearby was a shallow bowl—plain or ornate with delicate flowers or birds—to catch the cascading blood as it flowed from the diseased bodies. The pain of multiple incisions in the scalp, neck, wrists, ankles, back, penis, vagina, and forty other sites was invariably excruciating. Just as often the bites of leeches were used as an alternative to knives. Those who survived their bloodletting sometimes got better.

All across America in the eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth, people believed that health was restored because the body's four "humors"—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, first noted by the Greek physician Galen in 500 b.c.—were brought into proper balance by a medical therapy that actually dated back to the Stone Age. And if the removal of enough blood to cause the patient to lose consciousness—sometimes as much as 70 percent of the person's blood—didn't bring about a cure, there was always mercury, arsenic, or lead, which purged the body of its excesses if they didn't first poison the patient, or blistering, pulling teeth, sweating, ice, starvation, darkness, and silence. Illness was always dreaded; the popular treatments for it were hell on earth. Even babies were bled.

Royal Samuel Copeland had never been bled. His older sister, Cornelia Alice—"Nellie"—and their parents, Roscoe and Frances, had never been bled. No one in the Copeland family ever had to feel the sharp point of a knife pierce, over and over, the delicate veins of the body. No one had to endure, in the words of Royal Copeland, these "crude and disgusting ways of treating disease" either: "hearts of vipers, earthworms, green lizards, live frogs," or even, "the shavings of a man's skull that dy'd a violent death."