

Curator's Choice

Artifact of an Archaeologist

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This unusual canister was found in a brown paper bag containing various prehistoric artifacts from an archaeological site in Maryland. Inside this container were smaller pieces of bone and shell. This container was used to hold and protect these easily damaged artifacts. The archaeologist probably used this medicine before utilizing the empty container for holding artifacts.

The container would have originally contained an oral diarrhea medicine called Entero-vioform. On the front of the container a little cartoon figure is shown holding his tummy, implying an upset stomach or intestinal problem. Writing on the container reads, "For Diarrhoea Winter and Summer.... For the prevention and treatment of holiday diarrhoea (holiday tummy)". This implies that not only was diarrhea attributed to food poisoning and general sickness but also overindulgence during holiday feasting. Entero-vioform was also commonly used to deal with traveler's diarrhea from eating bad or contaminated food or water (Dukes 1998:74). This product was originally produced in Great Britain and may have been shipped to the United States or purchased overseas by the archaeologist.

Entero-vioform was widely promoted throughout the world as a safe and effective way to prevent and cure diarrhea. But in 1939, animal testing revealed the drug used in this medicine produced epilepsy and neurological damage. However, none of this research was published and the drug continued to stay on the market (Dukes 1998:74). Beginning in the 1950s, cases of a new disorder later named subacute myelo-optic neuropathy (SMON) appeared worldwide. This condition produced degenerative and in some cases irreversible neurological damage leading to blindness and paralysis. The most notable cases appeared in Japan where over 20,000 individuals were afflicted with SMON (Coburn 1998:486). As a result, the medicine was banned in several countries, which led to a large decrease in cases of SMON (Dukes 1998:74). Even after this outcome, the Ciba Company continued to produce Entero-vioform until 1985 when a public campaign forced it off the shelves (Coburn 1998:486).

Many interesting artifacts come to the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab looking for a home. Archaeologists study these objects to learn about humans in the past and in turn share this knowledge with the public. Archaeologists themselves also leave behind their own artifacts. Examining the ordinary containers used to package and protect artifacts for storage allows us to learn more about the archaeologists themselves.



Through this small container, we have learned the archaeologist had a bad case of diarrhea, possibly from traveling or overeating, and was able to purchase this medicine for relief. It is currently unknown if the archaeologist developed any neurological disorders as a result.

—Happy April Fools!

References Cited

- Coburn, David, Carl D'Arcy, and George Murray Torrance
1998 *Health and Canadian Society: Sociological Perspectives*. University of Toronto Press, Canada.
- Dukes, Graham, Mark Mildred, and Barbara Swartz
1998 *Responsibility for Drug Induced Injury: A Reference Book for Lawyers, the Health Professions, and Manufacturers*. IOS Press, Washington D.C.



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