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Doctrine of Signatures: the sign of nature

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ABSTRACT: Doctrine of Signature is an age old concept in history of medicine, plays an important role in folk medicine from the middle ages until the early modern era. Modern botanists dismiss it as a "primitive" or "pre-scientific" idea. In Homoeopathic system of medicine it still gets an importance because it helps to study our Materia Medica in an easy and interesting manner by compare and remember some symptoms.

KEYWORDS:

Signature, Doctrine, Paracelsus, Criticism, Homoeopathy

"You bring together the same anatomy of the herb and the same anatomy of the origin and that is the beginning."

Paracelsus, the Luther of Medicine. ⁽¹⁾

INTRODUCTION:

Doctrine of Signature or Organoleptic significance is an age old concept in history of medicine, plays an important role in folk medicine from the middle ages until the early modern era. In simple terms, the Doctrine of Signatures is the concept that God has marked everything. He created with a Sign (Signature) and the sign was an indication of the purpose for the creation of the item. The Doctrine is by observation one can determine from the colour of the flowers or roots, shape of the leaves,

growing place, the purpose of the plant was what God planned. It is the relation between the external physical characters of drug substances and the signs and symptoms of the medicines produced during drug proving. According to Oxford Dictionary 'Doctrine' is "what is taught; a body of instructions"; "a set of principles". ⁽⁹⁾

We may found this old concept in various western civilizations and previously it was adopted by some schools of philosophy. But now a day's modern world considers Doctrine of Signature as Superstition and pseudoscience. According to the modern science as the links are not causal, so it is purely coincidental and can be disregarded. Though there is no strong evidence that Doctrine of signatures helped in the discovery of medical uses of the plants, it is one of the sources of our Materia Medica and probably discussed only in Homoeopathy in this era.

Historical background:

In ancient cultures, we may found that the concept of doctrine of signature in medical science when people believed that human destiny was determined by astrology; from the time of **Dioscorides** and **Claudius Galen** there is a belief that each plant had magic power of its own.

Paracelsus:

Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bobbustus von Hohenheim was popularly known as Paracelsus (1490 – 1541) a Swiss physician developed the concept Doctrine of "Signatures" or "Similars", writing that "Nature marks each growth ... according to its curative benefit". The Cyclamen plant was used for Ear diseases due to anatomical resembles with its leaf and human ear, the lungs of Fox were used to cure lung diseases, a yellow remedy was used for jaundice etc. Later on, this view was revived by Giambattista Della Porta in his *Phytognomonica* (1588), Rademacher and Hahnemann. ⁽¹⁾

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Jakob Bohme:

This doctrine became popularised after the publication of a book named, "Signature Rerum" (The Signature of All Things) in 1621 by Jakob Bohme (1575–1624), a master shoemaker and mystic in the small town of Gorlitz, at Germany. He told that God created objects with a sign, or "signature", for their purpose. This doctrine became famous and also adopted by various schools of medicine, which states "root of trees, size of leaves, space of growing, or other signatures that can be determined by the observation of the plant's purpose in God's plan".

William Coles:

William Coles (1626 – 1662) an English botanist considered in his books "The Art of Simpling" and "Adam in Eden" that Walnut was good for curing Brain diseases because it looks like a Brain & Hypericum leaves having little holes, it could be beneficiary for pores of the skin and for all wounds.

Doctrine of Signature in Homoeopathy:

The doctrine considered that the part of the human body is having a therapeutic relationship and the same plant or its parts can be used for diseases of particular organ.

Examples:

Belladonna : The plant grows in the lime (CaCO_3) rich soil; from this we get the relation that Calcarea carbonica complements the action of Belladonna very well.

Calcarea carbonica : It has hard shell to protect the soft body. The patient of Calcarea carb, also needs protection.

Carbo vegetabilis: The colour of wood charcoal is black; hence the patient looks bluish-black due to cyanosis.

Chelidonium majus: The yellow colour of it resembles bile; hence it is well known medicine for Jaundice and Hepatic diseases.

Corallium rubrum: The colour of this coral is red; hence it helps to cure red chancres or coral red eruptions.

Euphrasia officinalis : It was popular as a medicine for the Eye diseases, because it has a black spot in its corolla, which looks like a pupil. *Euphorbia*: It having a milky juice, so it use to increasing the flow of milk.

Gelsemium sempervirens : The colour of its flower is yellow, hence it is useful in yellow skin, i.e.; Jaundice.

Hamamelis virginica : The plant having red juice ought, hence use in bleeding which is dark and clotted.

Hypericum : It has red juices, to be used in haemorrhages.

Lachesis : The snake always protrudes its tongue unsteadily, similarly the patient always trembles the tongue when it protrudes.

Pulmo vulpis : This is prepared from the fresh lungs of wolf hence used in Lung diseases, i.e.; Bronchial Asthma.

Tarentula hispanica : The Spanish spider comes out from the underground when a drum is beaten, similarly the patient has a characteristic symptom, i.e. oversensitive to music.

Thuja occidentalis : It was famous as a medicine for pedunculated warts. This plant has pedunculated wart like growth in the stem or junction of the branches.

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Views of some Pioneers:

Dr. John H. Clarke:

According to Dr. Clarke stated in his Materia Medica under the heading Characteristics of Magnesium phos. that, *"it is only right to say that Schussler arrived at them by a way of his own, which shows that there are other means besides proving of finding the keynote symptoms of remedies."*⁽⁴⁾

Herbert A. Roberts:

According to Dr. Roberts in the chapter of Drug Proving stated that *"the preparation and administration of medicines was a mystery for long, and the medicine man was respected for his powers. Various doctrines of healing flourish through the years; perhaps the most interesting of these was the doctrine of signatures, founded on the belief that each member of the vegetable kingdom carried within itself the resemblance of some organ or part of the human economy, as a sign that this particular plant was applicable to disruption of that organ. That was probably the most accordant method among all the very ancient systems of applying drugs"*⁽⁷⁾

Cyrus M. Boger:

In the chapter Reason and Fact, he stated that *"it has been derided and said to rise upon pure fancy, but I know of no accidents in nature and everything has an adequate cause, hence we should not be too ready to attribute such things to mere coincidence. Such correspondence is too many as well as much too distinctive to be lightly passed over. It seems rather an event that does not know what their meaning or actual connection is."*⁽²⁾

And other pioneers like **Dr. James C. Burnett**, **Dr. Constantine Hering** also supported this Doctrine of Signature. But our master **Dr. Hahnemann** was against this concept.⁽⁶⁾

Criticism:

Despite its long history, there are number of critical reviews against this doctrine some of are:

- There is no evidence that the morphological signature of the plant has never led to the discoveries of medicinal properties.
- Signatures are features rather than a priori clues to the utility of medicinal plants.
- It includes organoleptic features associated with therapeutic value.
- Doctrine of Signatures fundamentally is a mnemonic, so, it is more valuable in traditional cultures.

Conclusion:

In an ancient world where destiny of human beings are determined by the stars and planet; there is no

In an ancient world where destiny of human beings are determined by the stars and planet; there is no modern facilities for treatment of suffering humanity- Doctrine of Signature plays a significant role in folk medicine to filled up this vacuum. This concept is found throughout the world though modern botanists dismiss it as a "primitive" or "pre-scientific" idea. Even it is also figured in many Medical Textbooks until the early nineteenth century. In Homoeopathic system of medicine it is still gets an importance because it helps to study our Materia Medica in an easy and interesting manner by compare and remember some symptoms.

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