

Is water the best tonic?

Like many psychiatrists I have a Viennese great aunt. Once a year she makes the trip from her home to the spa resort of Baden, 20 miles from Vienna. Here she spends a month taking the waters, having massages, listening to the band in the park, eating cream cakes and talking to her friends. She goes because she believes it helps her rheumatism, although the rest of the family think that the lure of the cakes and chatter is more important. She has visited Baden since her childhood, and will do so until her death.

My aunt is enacting an old Central European ritual — the spa cure. Spas, named after the Belgian resort of Spa, have existed since the Roman era. In this country it is known that Henry I took the waters at Bath, followed by a series of reigning monarchs. But spas achieved their greatest popularity in the 19th century. This was for two reasons — the arrival of the railways, which made them accessible, and the rise of a comfortable middle class, who wished to combine treatment, social exclusivity and leisure away from the cities and their lower-class inhabitants. Most of the crowned heads and nobility of Europe spent their summers in the spas.

Visiting the spa was particularly essential when Europe's better-off became sick. Private clinics prospered in most resorts, dealing with a range of ailments. At the end of the 19th century the medical journals were full of learned papers discussing the relative merits of the waters of the various spas. Ragaz in Switzerland or Gastein in Austria were recommended for spinal complaints, while Marienbad in the modern day Czech Republic had a special reputation for gynaecological symptoms.

However, as historian Edward Shorter shows in his new history of psychosomatic

Spas are always popular but is it the baths or the relaxation that benefits people, asks **Dr Simon Wessely**

medicine (*From the Mind into the Body*, Free Press, New York), the main business of the spa was the treatment of nervous complaints. Depressed, anxious, hypochondriacal or hysterical businessmen and society ladies from Paris to St Petersburg filled the private clinics and rest-homes that proliferated in every spa.

Shorter shows how nervous patients would never dream of consulting the city psychiatrist (they looked after the insane in the asylum), but flocked in their thousands to the physicians and neurologists of the spas, where they would be treated for their irritable colons, stomachs and spines, their neurasthenia and their nervous exhaustions. Patients came not just from the Continent, but also from both Britain and America. The heroines of Henry James made the trip (as did James himself), while *The Practitioner*, a British journal for general practitioners which is



Treatment at Leukerbad in the 19th century

still in existence, discussed the merits of which spa was most suitable for which exhausted patient.

The Swiss spas were thought particularly suitable, and even Sir William Osler, the Regius Professor at Oxford, and one of the most influential physicians of modern times, recommended them for his neurasthenic patients. The current vogue for mineral water, visible in every British supermarket, began with the medicinal marketing of spa water.

Nowadays few modern British or American doctors would even think of a spa, or spa water, when considering medical treatment — although it is ironic to note last year's avalanche of publicity for claims that a regime of cold baths would help sufferers from chronic fatigue syndrome (ME). The cold bath was an important part of the treatment offered at many spas for neurasthenia or nervous exhaustion.

The spa retains its importance in European medicine, although no longer is it exclusively for the rich and fashionable. Each year the French state insurance scheme pays for more than 250,000 back pain sufferers to visit a spa, while even more Germans take the cure for symptoms such as exhaustion, pain and low blood pressure.

Does the spa work? Since thousands, like my aunt, come back year after year it must have some benefit. Most doctors would probably assume it is the general atmosphere of tranquillity, good food and

fresh air which manages to reduce stress and restore morale.

Considerable benefit must also come from the various forms of physiotherapy which are usually on offer. But what about the water itself? The February issue of the *British Journal of Rheumatology* addresses this issue. Doctors based at the Institute of Hydrotherapy in the French city of Nancy carried out a controlled trial of patients attending their local spa, the appropriately named Bains-les-Bains. Patients with chronic low back pain either received hydrotherapy, consisting of warm showers using the local sulphated water, or received standard medical care from their own doctor.

Those who went to the spa had less pain, and greater mobility. However, as the control group remained at home, it is probable that the benefits were more to do with the general ambience of the spa than the properties of the water. Which of us would not prefer warm baths and mountain air to the average doctor's waiting room?

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Switzerland, today: spas are still important in European medicine