

WATCH OUT FOR MOCKSAKINS

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The annual September joint meeting of the County Society and the Fort Benning doctors this year was held on August 18 at the Main Post Officers' Club. The meeting was unusual in other respects also. First, several of the drug firms had set up exhibit booths and furnished free cocktails for what the Army likes to term "the Happy Hour." Next, the turnout, which included some wives, children and friends, was the largest in the history of the joint gatherings. And finally, the program was certainly the most interesting one ever held.

The interest was created by snakes, very alive and lots of them. Major Stanton Fischer introduced the subject with an entertaining historical account of how the snake slithered into medicine and onto its insignia. From the age of the Greeks to the time of modern anesthesiology, the snake and its venom have enjoyed a close association with medicine. We were reminded that the Army's medical insignia with its double snakes entwined around a winged staff was not the true one, but really the staff of Mercury. Since Major Fischer did not reveal how this confusion came about, we feel free to relate one version given us by a British medical officer during World War II (whose country utilizes the correct one of a single snake around a forked staff). According to this gentleman, the double snake staff was foisted on to the unsuspecting U.S. Army by the facetious British during World War I who, certain that the illiterate colonials would never know the difference, thought that the staff of Mercury was more appropriate for American Army medicine and its preoccupation with "pro stations" and the treatment of venereal disease. (You will have to recall here that the old "blue ointment," Unguenten Hydrargyriasis, a concoction of lard, suet, and mercury were a popular part of the standard antiluetic treatment in years past.)

Major Fischer's talk was not all historical, and its latter half was devoted to the modern treatment of snakebites. Many of the fairly recent but long-accepted measures such as the tourniquets, skin slashing, suction methods, and chilling were shown to be ineffective and frequently harmful. Immobilization and the use of the modern anti-venom sera within a time interval of three hours or less have taken over as the treatment of choice. Whiskey is of no help except to the bystanders and those assisting the victim.

The highlight of the evening, however, was the demonstration by Captain Harry Ball and his two assistants, snake experts from the 11th Air Assault Division, who brought along their large collection of nonpoisonous and poisonous pets. There were water snakes, grass snakes, king snakes, chicken snakes, hog-nosed snakes, whip snakes, blue runners, black runners, and others in great numbers. There were also copperheads, rattlers

and cottonmouth moccasins. A matronly copperhead even obliged by giving birth to a brood of baby copperheads during the demonstration.

In distinguishing the poisonous from the nonpoisonous varieties, if you are ever in doubt as to how triangular the head is, get closer and peer into his eyes. The nice ones have round pupils. If you ever find yourself in the unlikely situation of holding on to a snake's tail while the rest of him is disappearing down a hole, pull him out a little and scrutinize his anal plate and the scale formation next to it. And since the nonpoisonous snake has lots of teeth and makes lots of puncture holes, while his unpleasant brother leaves only a double fang mark, if all else fails, you can always let him bite you and inspect the result.

Except for a few distrustful or chicken-livered souls like George Conner and Bruce Newsom, who headed for the opposite end of the room whenever any variety of snakes was brought within ten feet, the rest of the doctors were bravely crowding around. In fact, the enthusiasm of the audience was such that Captain Ball (a manic type to begin with who, despite long familiarity with his pets, insisted on calling them mocksakins) got so carried away in demonstrating the innocuousness of the nonpoisonous snake bite that his hands and fingers were soon dripping uncoagulable blood from hundreds of puncture wounds. The demonstration reached its climax when Captain Ball, holding onto a large and unfriendly water moccasin behind its ears, was asked by the ubiquitous Bob Vaughan to see if he could get the snake to open its mouth a little wider to show off its cotton mouth. The obliging Captain sneaked a cautious digit over the snake's snout, opened its jaws; and was rewarded with a quick fang slash on the index finger.

To demonstrate his theme that snake-bitten people shouldn't panic, nut Ball continued to show snakes and lecture for the next half hour, holding his left arm still and all the while describing the pain, the swelling, the discoloration and the various subjective sensations he was experiencing as these appeared and progressed. Some of the panicky doctors did their best to hurry the meeting to a close by retreating to the whiskey dispensing booths when it became apparent that Captain Ball, even though getting wobblier by the minute, was one of those "the show must go on" types. He was finally hustled off to the Post hospital and bedded down. There it was discovered that the Captain was sensitive to horse serum, and Major Fischer spent the rest of the night and part of the next day desensitizing his patient and getting a couple of vials of anto him.

The '64 joint meeting was a great success. It was probably one of the most effective demonstrations and one of the most educational and instructive ever given on the subject. Captain Ball, after a couple of weeks in the hospital, still has his arm and is back on the job demonstrating snakes to the troops. Our Benning informants tell us that Captain Ball

has formulated two maxims as a result of his experience:

1. Never handle a poisonous snake without first making sure that Bob Vaughan is not in the audience, and
2. never trust a mockskin.

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