Camphor and respiratory epidemics: The promise of a divine remedy



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The world is facing a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) disease outbreak with more than 90,000 reported cases and in excess of 3,000 deaths in 76 countries (at the time of writing this article).

The symptoms include fever, cough, acute respiratory syndrome, kidney failure, and even death (1 to 2 percent in the infected). To minimise transmission, it is recommended to use handwash regularly, covering of mouth and nose when coughing and sneezing and avoid contact with those who show symptoms. There is currently no cure for this in modern medical science and a vaccine may take time to prepare.

Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya is a divinely guided movement started by Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, the Promised Messiah and Mahdi[as]. The Promised Messiah[as] emphasised that the lost glory of Islam will be regained by turning again towards the Holy Quran for guidance in every matter. He reminded us:

"It is my faith that the Holy Quran is perfect in its teaching and that there is no verity that has been left out of it, as Allah, the Glorious, has said:

وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتٰبَ تِبْيَانًا لِّكُلِّ شَيْءٍ

'We have sent down to thee the Book which is an exposition of everything' [Surah al-Nahl, Ch.16: V.90];
and again:

مَا فَرَّطْنَا فِي الْكِتٰبِ مِنْ شَيْءٍ

'We have not left out anything from the Book.' [Surah al-An'am, Ch.6: V.39]" (*Al-Haq Mubahatha Ludhiana*, Ruhani Khazain, Vol. 4, pp. 80-81)

Furthermore, about the guidance regarding medical principles the Promised Messiah[as] states:

"When I looked at the Holy Quran, keeping in mind the books that dealt with physical medicine, I discovered that the Holy Quran sets out in an excellent manner the principles of physical medicine." (*Chashma-e-Ma'rifat*, Ruhani Khazain, Vol. 23, pp. 102-103)

Therefore, we as Ahmadi Muslims can turn to this book to see if it has guided us in the matter of controlling epidemic diseases.

The promise of camphor

The Promised Messiah[as] has given a unique principle of the Holy Quran on names used by Allah:

"It is a fact that the names given by Allah to things signify their properties" (Commentary on the Holy Quran, Vol. 1, Surah al-Fatihah, p. 42). We do not have to venture far to find a named remedy for suppressing poisonous and infectious matter in the Holy Quran.

The Holy Quran states in Surah Al-Dahr.

اِنَّ الْاَبْرَارَ يَشْرَبُوْنَ مِنْ كَاْسٍ كَانَ مِزَاجُهَا كَافُوْرًا ۚ

"But the virtuous drink of a cup, tempered with camphor." (Ch.76: V.6)

The Promised Messiah[as], while stating the spiritual significance of this verse, also denoted the Arabic meaning of camphor:

"The root of the Arabic word for camphor connotes suppression, or covering up, which means that their illicit emotions will be suppressed and they will become purehearted and will enjoy the coolness of understanding." (*The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*, p. 80)

Afterwards, the Promised Messiah[as] states:

"What is conveyed in this verse, that is to say, that such people draw far away from the passions of self and incline so completely towards God that their hearts become cold to worldly pursuits and their passions are suppressed as camphor suppresses poisonous matter." (*The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*, p. 114)

In his discourses, the Promised Messiah[as] explained the value of camphor. While discussing the great plague that ravaged India from 1898 onwards, the Promised Messiah[as] said:

"Muslims apply camphor to the bodies of the dead in accordance with the custom of the Holy Prophet[sa], because camphor is a material which kills epidemic bacteria and noxious elements. It cools the human body and prevents the spread of diseases that arise from filth. This is why the Quran states that believers will be given the cold drink of camphor. Modern research has also established that just as camphor is beneficial in cholera, it is beneficial in the case of plague as well. I would like to inform my community that this is an extremely beneficial substance. It is my belief that since the Holy Quran has informed us that camphor cools, relaxes and soothes the sensation of burning, this encourages us to make use of camphor." (*Malfuzat* [English], Vol. 1, p. 254)

When Hazrat Zainab[ra], the eldest daughter of the Holy Prophet[sa], passed away in the 8th year of Hijra, the Holy Prophet[as] himself gave instructions for the washing, preparation of the body and burial. One of the important instructions was the use of *kafoor* or camphor. (*Sahih al-Bukhari*)

What is camphor?

Kafoor (Arabic) or camphor is a white waxy substance that comes from the wood of camphor laurel (*cinnamomum camphora*), a large evergreen tree found in Asia. The smell of camphor is very distinct and those who hail from South Asia can instantly recognise the smell that reminds them of the mothballs used to keep bugs and germs away or of Vicks VapoRub used by their mothers when they had a cold.

Camphor has been valued historically for its extensive and diverse uses, e.g. the Chinese used camphor as an antiseptic, antipruritic, cold remedy, circulatory stimulant and analeptic, whilst the Japanese used it in torch-light material and added small quantities to fireworks to make them brighter. However, it was in preventing and controlling the spread of diseases that it had a widespread renown. Camphor was used as a fumigant during the black death of the 14th century Europe to control the spread of the plague. It was extensively used in the outbreaks of cholera, smallpox and influenza during the 19th century with reportedly high success. Camphor mothballs are commonly use in the Indian subcontinent to keep insects and germs away. Camphor is an antimicrobial, antiviral and antitussive (cough reliever). It is a common ingredient of some topical analgesics where it has been used to treat muscle aches and pains as it activates both cold and heat receptors on the skin.

The role of camphor in epidemics: A historical account

The founder of homeopathic school of medicine, Samuel Hahnemann of Germany was a great proponent for use of camphor and used it exclusively in mother tincture form. He called camphor a "divine remedy" and said that its effects are both puzzling and wonderful as it removes the pathological effects of many other drugs, including many homeopathic remedies. He stated that it is difficult to determine all of its effects and at some future period, the remainder of its effects will be uncovered. He discovered that camphor can antidote opium with great success.

His influential feat was its use as a cure for the Russian influenza of the 18th century. Russian influenza was a flu pandemic that originated in China in 1831 and advanced out of Russia into Europe and had a devastating impact on the population. In 1831, Hahnemann published that camphor was the specific remedy for influenza and the patient had to continuously smell camphor solution and he would be promptly cured in 24 hours. While Hahnemann was ridiculed at that time for suggesting a cure through olfaction (smell), the published accounts of doctors from that time attest to the efficacy of such treatment. For later stages of influenza, Hahnemann recommended that camphor would make the disease much milder, but instead, nux vomica would cure it homeopathically with only one dose. Later, Gelsemium was proven [its homeopathic effects were discovered] and shown to be more efficacious in influenza.

In the same year, 1831, the Asiatic cholera epidemic appeared that had travelled from India to Western Asia, Europe, Great Britain and also reached the Americas. It caused more deaths, more quickly than any other epidemic disease in the 19th century. Samuel Hahnemann again published four pamphlets in which he presented camphor as the remedy for this disease given in extremely small doses. While those who followed Hahnemann's, advice had much lower mortality (<5-10 percent), those who refused this advice had a mortality in excess of 50 percent. (It is possible that many of those afflicted died due to the inhumane practices of bloodletting and concoctions of poisonous remedies with no effect by the non-homeopathic physicians; treatments that Hahnemann strictly forbade.)

Hahnemann wrote, "Camphor is the great cholera prophylactic" and that "camphor alone can cure the epidemic. Camphor is better able than any other

remedy to destroy just with its vapour the smallest animals of the lower order very quickly, and is therefore capable of rapidly destroying and eliminating the cholera disease which most likely consists of an imperceptible living organism fatal to humans, which attaches itself to skin or hair or clothing and is thus transmitted, unnoticed from one person to another." Though Hahnemann noted that camphor was very effective in the prevention and cure in the early stages of cholera, other homeopathic remedies (veratrum album, rhus tox, and cuprum metallicum) were more effective in the later stages of the disease.

It was a remarkable foresight by Hahnemann to believe in the transmission theory of cholera with microorganisms as bacteria had not been discovered yet. It was 50 years later that another German, the bacteriologist Robert Koch in 1884 proved the presence of the bacteria Vibrio cholerae in the intestinal tissue of cholera patients. Hahnemann also published a treatise on hygiene as an important measure to prevent and control epidemics while also being one of the first people to present comprehensive instructions on the public health principles during contagious diseases, including recovery, removal and isolation of those infected, disinfection of their rooms and utensils and importance of good nutritious food. He also emphasised the importance of lifestyle (diet and exercise) for health, the humane treatment of all sick, including prisoners and patients with mental illness.

When the plague arrived in India in 1898, the Promised Messiah[as] recommended the use of camphor and he also used it to treat patients. In *Malfuzat*, the Promised Messiah[as], when discussing the plague, stated:

"A new discovery has established that it is beneficial to use camphor with *jadwar* [delphinium denudatum, a medicinal herb used in the Indian subcontinent]. You should procure a quantity of *jadwar*, mix it with vinegar and make capsules of 2 *ratti* [243 milligrams] each, and take these capsules with fresh *lassi* [a yoghurt drink]. It is very beneficial to administer these capsules to women and children daily. I am also preparing a medicine, which, if God desires, will prove immensely beneficial." [*Malfuzat,* Vol. 1, p. 255].

In another place, the Promised Messiah[as] guided us:

"In the plague and other infectious disease like cholera, camphor is very valuable and has proven its benefit. [*Malfuzat*, Vol. 3, p. 8]

Hazrat Khalifatul Masih I[ra] once wrote to Hakim Dost Muhammad:

"The Promised Messiah[as] gave patients of the plague, pellets made of *jadwar* and *kafoor* [camphor] in vinegar, with *lassi* or tincture camphor with spirit of chloroform." (*Risala Hakim Hazik*, March 1928, p. 50)

As liquid camphor and solid camphor globules were toxic if ingested in any substantial quantity (3-5ml of 20 percent camphor oil or more than 30mg/kg is a potentially lethal dose) and several deaths were also reported due to overdose, there was a need for a safer version of this divine remedy.

Camphor was reconstituted as a salve or ointment, known as a natural menthol rub, for common cold by the newly established Metholatum company of the USA (est. 1889). This used small amounts of camphor (less than 11 percent camphor) and menthol dissolved in petroleum jelly.

The method of use was to apply a small amount under the nose and on the chest, whereby vapours of camphor would be inhaled continuously.

Similarly, another company, Vicks, also came up with their salve in 1905 which was named Vicks VapoRub (less than 5 percent camphor). They advertised it widely as a remedy for cold, cough, flu and other respiratory illnesses.

In 1918, the Spanish flu pandemic was a test for this remedy. This viral influenza killed almost 50 million people around the world. In USA alone, every fourth American was afflicted and around 500,000 died. This brought the whole of USA to a standstill and hospitals were overflowing and unable to help victims. There were no true medicines for viral pneumonia and there was little that could be done for the suffering people. Many died due to an overdose of aspirin for their fever. However, a perceptible reader of the historical archives would find that there were cures available.

Dr WA Dewey collected data from 50 homeopathic doctors who, in total, treated more than 100,000 influenza cases across USA and published his findings in 1920 in the *Journal of the American Institute of Homeopathy*. His report showed that the death rate with homeopathic remedies was very low (less than 1 to 4 percent) compared to the colleagues of such doctors who practiced regular medicine.

The death rate with regular medicine was reportedly above 30 percent; some regular doctors even losing over 60 percent of their cases. The remedies used at that time by the homeopathic physicians were mainly Gelsemium, Bryonia and Aconite.

The current worldwide head of Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya, Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad[aa], has recommended homeopathic remedies for his community to use for the current coronavirus outbreak; the remedies include gelsemium and aconite.

Vicks was also advertised as a treatment for the Spanish flu in USA and its sales jumped almost ten-fold, with drug stores running out of stock. A total of 17 million jars of Vicks were sold in 1918 and even more the next year. There are no published accounts of the efficacy of Mentholatum or Vicks at that time, but testimonials published in newspapers show that family members who used the camphor containing remedies avoided getting influenza.

Current state of camphor

Camphor was first recognised as a medical product in the 18th century, however, by 1954 there were more than 100 reports of acute camphor poisoning primarily involving accidental ingestion of camphorated oil or camphor-containing cough and cold preparations. These reports include around 20 deaths attributed to camphor intoxication due to overdose. In 1982, the US Food & Drug Administration (FDA) declared camphorated oil as "not generally recognise as safe" and any camphor over-the counter product was limited to having less than 11 percent camphor. Camphor is no longer listed in the US National Formulary and thus is no longer considered a drug.

Through divine mercy, camphor products are still available widely over the counter e.g. Vicks VapoRub, Vicks Vapoinhaler, Mentholatum Natural Rub, Tiger Balm etc. These have less than 5 percent camphor and are some of the most widely used over-the-counter remedies commonly used for cough, cold, flu, decongestion and non-life-threatening respiratory infections.

There are no clinical trials on camphor, though one recent research publication reported a survey of parents using Vicks VapoRub. Parents favoured Vicks compared to simple petroleum jelly or no treatment for symptomatic relief of nocturnal cough, congestion and sleep difficulty due to upper respiratory tract infections in children.

Caution should still be applied in the continued use of camphor products as there have been reports of seizures after accidental oral ingestion of Vicks. In addition, there have been reports of respiratory depression due to continued use of Vicks VapoRub in very young children. Therefore, it is not recommended to be used in children less than 2 years of age. Doctors recommend that Vicks should be applied on throat, chest and back and not under the nose or on nostrils.

Future of camphor

While clinical research on this divine remedy is severely lacking, historical evidence suggests that it may have role in reducing the spread of epidemic respiratory infections. We can hypothesise that mild application of camphor containing salves (like Vicks) may mitigate the spread of acute respiratory viruses such as the latest outbreak of coronavirus, now known as COVID-19.

Clinical studies are needed to demonstrate this effect. Further research on this topic may also help discover the best form of camphor for use in medicine.

The world awaits the pharmaceutical giants to come up with a drug or a vaccine for the current strain of coronavirus, but the response is expected to be slow as the primary driver for these large companies is usually profit and not people's welfare.

It is the wonder of the Holy Quran that has already pointed us towards a gracious gift from God in the form of camphor and other homeopathic remedies for coronavirus – the simplest and cheapest of cures that are easily available. Indeed, the Holy Quran is true when it declares:

يُرِيْدُ اللّٰهُ بِكُمُ الْيُسْرَ وَلَا يُرِيْدُ بِكُمُ الْعُسْرَ

"Allah desires ease for you and desires not hardship for you." (Surah al-Baqarah, Ch.2: V.186)

(Please note that this article should be taken as a historical research analysis that provides evidence for the truth of the Holy Quran and not as medical advice. For medical advice, please consult your doctor)

Hadith in Commentary

Treating children with love and care



Hazrat Mir Muhammad Ishaq[ra]

Once, some clothes were given to the Holy Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, as gifts that included a black stripped shawl. The Holy Prophet[sa] asked who he should give the shawl to, but there was silence in response; everyone remained quiet. Upon this the Holy Prophet[sa] said to call Umm-e-Khalid (who was a girl of 4 or 5 years of age). When she was brought before the Holy Prophet[sa], he wrapped the shawl around her with his blessed hands and, affectionately, prayed for her by saying ابلی واخلقی twice, meaning, "May God grant you a long life and wear this with joy." Then the Holy Prophet[sa] showed Umm-e-Khalid the lines on the shawl and while pointing towards it said:

یا ام خالد ھذا سناہ

Meaning, "O Umm-e-Khalid, [look] how nice and beautiful these lines are."

From this hadith, we can learn how much love and kindness the Holy Prophet[sa] showed towards children; how he would make them happy and take care of their feelings and needs. Some parents treat their children in a very bad manner. They do not fulfil their needs and, as a result, their children develop bad habits. Even when they are older, they cannot let go of these bad habits. In this way, their whole life is destroyed and ruined. Thus, children should be treated very kindly and special attention should be paid to their needs and acceptable demands. From childhood, [parents] should inculcate healthy habits within them.

Ill-disciplined children do not only cause disgrace for their parents, but rather if the parents purposefully neglect the [good] upbringing of their child, then they will be answerable to God, as due to their neglect, a person went astray from the right path.

(Originally published in *Al Fazl* on 13 April 1940 in the form of notes taken by Mahmood Ahmad Khalil Sahib from the lectures on hadith by Hazrat Mir Muhammad Ishaq[ra], a scholar of hadith and brother-in-law of the Promised Messiah[as])