

A Leech Jar



*Leech jar, probably American 19th century.
Height 12". Free-blown colorless glass,
stemmed footed bowl with everted rim.
Interior haze. Anonymous collector.*

MEDICAL PRACTICE AND TERMINOLOGY: The utilization of leeches in the letting of blood to restore the balance of the four humors (blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile) goes back at least 2500 years and continued well into the 19th century. The death of George Washington was probably hastened when he was bled four times within 24 hours by his overseer and several physicians for a severe sore throat. Most 18th and 19th century apothecaries had a ready supply of saleable medical leeches prominently displayed in a large glass or ceramic jar similar to that herein illustrated.

The medicinal leech, *Hirudo medicinalis*, is one of some 700 species of leech belonging to the phylum Annelida, segmented worms. The majority of leeches live in fresh water habitats, while a few are terrestrial or marine.

The medicinal leech is hematophagous and attaches itself to a host via a sucker to feed on its blood. Prior to feeding the leech secretes a peptide, hirudin, to prevent blood from clotting. Predatory leeches are ubiquitous in many bodies of fresh water throughout America. Farm animals were a reliable source of food for leeches, however replacement of the horse by tractors and cattle watering ponds by cisterns significantly reduced their populations, particularly in Europe and Great Britain. Leech bites are generally innocuous. Although rarely serious, anaphylactic reactions may occur. Surprisingly the bite is generally painless and a person's first realization of being bitten is often simply the sight of a liberal flow of blood running down their leg. This has led to the idea that, in addition to its anticoagulant, the leech may also introduce an anaesthetic with the initial bite, but such a compound has not, as of yet, been isolated. Most leeches have attaching suckers on either end, but penetrating jaws only on the rostrum. It is advisable to remove an attached leech with one's fingernails rather than a lighted cigarette, salt, soap or vinegar. The latter treatment should be avoided as it may cause the leech to regurgitate intestinal content into the wound and carry with it a pathogenic virus, bacteria or parasites from a previous meal.

THE OBJECT: This week's object is a large leech jar of a relatively standard 19th century form made in France, England and America where leech therapy was most widely practiced. The jar does not have a glass lid as it would have suffocated the leeches. A cover for the jar perhaps consisted of cloth tied over the wide mouth. Apothecary glass wares were widely advertised and produced in post-Revolutionary 18th and 19th century America. The advent of the germ theory accounted for many diseases and leech therapy largely grew out of favor by the 20th century. One imagines that many of these objects were converted for the containment of candy or goldfish.

Supported with grants from



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