

Wax Baths in Leprosy

JEAN GARDINER

Sitanala Hospital, Tangarang, W. Java, Indonesia

In the physical treatment of leprosy, when dealing with the clawed hand and contractures of the individual fingers, the important factor to consider is the abnormally dry skin where sweat glands have been damaged. When a patient has not been taught that he must regularly straighten his fingers while stabilizing his metacarpo-phalangeal joints, then the dry skin over the flexor angles at the interphalangeal joints seems to precipitate the deformity so commonly seen in the physically untreated leprosy patient. The wax bath that has proved beneficial in rheumatoid arthritis and other diseases affecting the joints, helps very little in the prevention or remobilizing of the clawed fingers in leprosy because it (or other local oils) fails to make the dry skin moist.

However, soaking in cool water does appear to make the skin more elastic for a short period. If the water soaking is done daily just before supervised exercise, the patient is able to extend his fingers just that little bit more which makes the progressive improvement that much quicker.

Basins and buckets of cool water are easy to come by, and soaking of the hand and foot can be done at home daily with safety whereas wax baths need to be supervised for temperature and specific contraindications. Water soaking appears to be effective for temporarily softening skin, whereas wax baths do not seem to have this effect. It would therefore appear that soaking the hand (or foot) in cool water meets a need for the leprosy patient that the wax bath cannot meet, and that, therefore, a wax bath in a leprosy clinic is not an essential piece of apparatus.

There may be exceptions to cool water soaking, e.g. in cases of acute nerve pain. However, for these patients the physical treatment is rest, with daily passive joint movement, and also warmth, which may be given by applying a linament occluded by a bandage, or by bandages only, or by a woollen covering. Although the wax bath can give comfort in the subacute stage of nerve pain, it is not in the author's opinion an essential in the leprosy clinic.