

A Brief History of Scabies

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Known in animals as mange, the disease has been described since ancient times. A disease not unlike human scabies was described in the Old Testament and also by Aristotle in the fourth century BC (1, 4). However, archeological evidence and Egyptian hieroglyphics, suggests Scabies has been irritating mankind for at least 2,500 years. Known in Europe by either the itch or gale, and commonplace in areas of filth and poverty, the disease was well-described. Celsus, a physician of ancient Rome, coined the term “scabies” to describe this condition (2). “Scabies” is derived from the Latin word for “scratch” (scabere). The mite was described in early scientific treatises in 1100 AD, but the connection to human disease was not made until 500 years later (1, 3, 4, 5).

A physician, Giovan Cosimo Bonomo, described the mite in fluid expressed from the lesions of infested patients with the aid of microscopy (3, 5). This description is notable for being one of the first accurate descriptions of parasitic etiology of disease. Bonomo noted that puncture of the small, itching blisters that had not yet scabbed provided relief for those infected. He discovered a small, barely visible white speck within the blister secretions. A creature with 6 legs, a sharp head, and “two little horns at the end of a snout” could be visualized. He found that most persons with chronic itch were infected by these creatures. He surmised that these creatures used their mouths to burrow into the skin. Bonomo further observed a mite laying eggs, and deduced that these creatures must undergo sexual reproduction.

Bonomo also documented that the disease was easily spread, not only through mere contact of an infected person, but because the mites could survive outside human skin, and therefore lie in sheets, clothing and bedding. A cure could be achieved by topical therapy, such as sulfur which is still used today.

More information on the history of scabies can be found at:

<<http://www.dermato.med.br/hds/bibliography/1998giovan-cosimo-bonomo.htm>>

References

1. Beeson BB. Acarusscabiei. Study of its history. Arch Dermatol Syphilogr 1927;16:297-307.
2. Celsus AC. De Medicina. In. Loeb Classical Library Edition 1935 ed; c25 BC.
3. Hebra F. On the Diseases of the Skin, Including the Exanthemata. In. London: New Sydenham Society; 1868. p. 175-178.