

Tetracycline against children's diarrhoea

A note from South Cameroon*

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In the south of Cameroon, Tetracycline capsules (250 mg) are extremely popular; they are sold everywhere, without a doctor's prescription. Tetracycline is available in informal medicine stores, in shops and kiosks selling general provisions, in market booths and from hawker. The jar with red-yellow capsules is a common sight next to tins of sardines, cigarettes, bread or oranges. In Ebolowa, a rural town of about 20,000 inhabitants, Tetracycline can be bought in an estimated fifty different places. During the cocoa season, when the farmers have some money from the sale of their harvest, the number of sales points probably doubles, and so does the price of the product. But Tetracycline is not only available in the town. Every village has at least one little 'shop' where one can buy some necessary medicines against pain, fever, intestinal worms, coughing and diarrhoea. Hawkers, on foot or on bicycle also visit the villages to offer their goods for sale, and these goods always include some medicines. Tetracycline is regarded as one of the most useful drugs. This situation prevails in the whole of South Cameroon, but also in other parts of the country and in countless other developing countries both in and outside Africa.†

During research in 1980 and 1983 I had numerous interviews with buyers and sellers of pharmaceuticals and spent many days in shops and markets to observe the informal sale of medicines (Van der Geest 1981). Tetracycline was bought by almost everybody, but two categories of people were the most frequent buyers: mothers of young children and young men. The former wanted Tetracycline against their children's diarrhoea; the latter needed it against gonorrhoea.

Many people think that Tetracycline helps against "any disease" and use it accordingly. Tetracycline is one of the rare western pharmaceuticals which have been given local African names: *Folkolo*, which literally means 'wound healer' (in Cameroon) and *Tupaye* in Burkina Faso (Pradervand 1985). The Cameroon (Bulu) name is probably derived from the common practice to open the capsule and strew the powder into a wound. Chloramphenicol, which is available in white capsules is called *Folkolo blanc* and is regarded as the same medicine but stronger.

* Unpublished note (1985) as far as the author can remember.

† See for example Pradervand (1985) for Burkina Faso, Wolffers (1985) for Sri Lanka, and Van der Geest (1982).

The idea that Tetracycline helps against diarrhoea in children is remarkably widespread. The belief does not seem to be effectively contradicted by official health workers. It is most frequently used for children over the age of one. Some mothers give their child one capsule twice a day, until the diarrhea has ceased, but the exact doses being used vary strongly. A mother of six children explained:

Folkolo treats the child's diarrhoea. I often use the red-yellow type. I open the capsule and put the powder in a glass of water. During the day I give my child some [number unknown] spoonfuls. One capsule is sufficient for a day. If the diarrhoea is strong it takes about four days to stop it. I have not learnt this from anybody. I have personally experienced that my child's diarrhea stopped after using this method.

The following note was written down by a research assistant:

In the market I see a young woman, about 23 years of age. She buys four Tetracycline capsules and wraps them in a piece of paper. I ask her if she is sick. She answers: "My child has diarrhoea. I press a lemon out and put the capsule [the powder] in the juice. My child drinks it, one in the morning, one in the evening, for two days". She says she also uses *Folkolo* against hepatitis and coughing. I walk along with her and she tells me that she has learned the use of *Folkolo* from acquaintances. A man who follows us says: "But who does not know the use of *Folkolo*!"

References

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