

Gifts that keep on giving

Self Care health facts column

1387
2013

04 December 2013



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Whilst it seems that in the 21st century we live in a very materialistic society, the most sought-after gifts are still probably those of health and happiness. If we can achieve the one, the second probably follows – but, generally speaking, these are gifts that money can't buy.

Still on the health theme, it used to be said that penicillin was the ideal gift for someone who had everything. The suggestion was, of course, whatever the affliction, or infection, penicillin could cure it. At one time, perhaps, this might have been true; but these days penicillin hardly cures anything at all – such is the indiscriminate way in which we've used it. And this critical situation applies not only to penicillin, but to nearly all antibiotics we presently have available.

Of course, there are conditions when antibiotics are necessary; but these are the conditions for which they should be reserved. Simple upper respiratory tract infections, such as the common cold, do not respond to antibiotics; and their use in such infections will only lead to greater resistance. A good New Year's resolution might be not to expect or request an antibiotic from your doctor for coughs and colds.

The original Christmas gifts were reported to be gold, frankincense and myrrh; and whilst it's unlikely that any of these items would now be on the top of your Christmas shopping list, there is no doubt 2,000 years ago they would have been well received. Interestingly each has, or more correctly did have, a strong relationship with health.

As well as its value as a precious metal, gold has also been used in healing. In the 17th century, gold cordials (gold mixed with alcohol) were prescribed for such ailments as melancholy, fainting, swooning and fevers. Although, there is no evidence that these treatments were in any way successful.

Frankincense, as the name implies, for much of its 4000 year history, has been used for its aromatic qualities. Today it is in use as a component of perfumes and toiletries. Records of its medicinal use date back to the 3rd century, when it was recommended for gout, catarrh, colic and gastrointestinal haemorrhage.

In a pharmaceutical sense myrrh seems to have the best credentials. As recently as the middle of the last century, Australian doctors prescribed pain relieving mixtures containing tincture of myrrh. In Hebrew tradition, myrrh was often mixed with wine and given to a condemned man as an anaesthetic. These days myrrh is valued in some cultures for its antiseptic, antifungal and anti-inflammatory properties.



Photo by Luke Low

If you can't (or don't want to) get your hands on those middle-eastern perfumes and pain relievers and you haven't yet completed your Christmas shopping, health related gifts might still be an option. If jewellery is on your shopping list, you might consider something that will not only last a lifetime, but might save a life as well – a MedicAlert bracelet or necklet. Check out the website www.medicalert.org.au for more details.

There are other healthy alternatives you might consider at this time as well. If you or someone in your family has high blood pressure and gadgets are your go-to items for gift ideas, then an electronic home-use blood pressure measuring device (called a sphygmomanometer by the medicos) could be ideal. Meanwhile, for people with diabetes, you might like an upgrade to the new miniature-sized blood glucose meters - about the same size and shape as a mobile phone but at a fraction of the cost and without the bothersome phone calls.

If you want more ideas for gifts that keep on giving good health, ask at your local Self Care pharmacy. Log onto the website www.psa.org.au, click on "Self Care" then "Find a Self Care Pharmacy" or phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 for the nearest location.