

Source 1: Medicine and the Lewis and Clark Expedition

Jefferson's letter to Benjamin Rush on February 28, 1803

Capt. Lewis is brave, prudent, habituated to the woods, & familiar with Indian manners & character. He is not regularly educated, but he possesses a great mass of accurate observation on all the subjects of nature which present themselves. . . It would be very useful to state for him those objects on which it is most desirable he should bring us information. For this purpose I ask the favor of you to prepare some notes of such particulars as may occur in his journey & which you think should draw his attention & inquiry.

Thomas Jefferson

From: Lewis & Clark College. "Jefferson Sends Lewis to Study with Benjamin Rush and Casper Wistar." *The Bicentennial Commemoration of the Lewis & Clark Expedition*. July 8, 2003. <http://www.thejourneycontinues.org/200/021603.html>

In order for the mission to be successful, the men in the expedition needed to be healthy. Jefferson realized that Lewis needed expert medical advice on how to treat illnesses and give emergency medical treatment, so he wrote to Dr. Rush. Jefferson requested that Rush educate Lewis on modern medicine of the day. Lewis received his training in Philadelphia, May 1803.



Dr. Benjamin Rush

Jefferson personally knew Rush and held him in high esteem. Rush had been an important figure during the American Revolution and was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. In the early 1800s, he was the most eminent physician in the nation and the foremost authority on medical treatments.

Medicine had not changed much in over two hundred years.

The need for sterility was not yet known, nor was anesthesia administered. Thermometers and stethoscopes had not been invented. A very careful physical observation of the patient was necessary for all treatments. A flushed face

indicated too much blood, and a weak pulse meant that stimulation was needed. The success of treatments was determined by the visible results.

The popular belief of the time was that all illnesses had to do with the blood. Dr. Rush was best known for promoting bloodletting and purging. Bloodletting was known as "bleeding" the patient – cutting the problem area open and draining the bad blood! Purging was accomplished with various types of medications that would expel fluids/solids from the body. "Sweating" the patient was another treatment practiced to purge the body of impurities.

"Dr. Rush's Bilious Pills" were popular purging pills. The pills were made up of mercury mixed with a laxative. At that time mercury was used to kill some organisms that caused skin diseases, but it is now known that mercury is toxic (poisonous) to the brain. Laxatives were used to loosen the bowels. Rush advised Lewis on other medicines such as diuretics to increase the flow of urine and emetics to produce vomiting.

Rush instructed Lewis on how to use lancets (instruments to make small incisions) for bleeding and cleavers for amputations. He compiled a complete list of medical supplies and medicines for Lewis to purchase for the trip. Finally, Dr. Rush wrote out a list of health commandments for the expedition to follow.

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Dr. Rush's Rules for Healthy Living

1. Flannel worn next to the skin, especially in wet weather.
2. Always to take a little raw spirits [whiskey/brandy] after being very wet or much fatigued; and as little as possible at any other time.
3. When you feel the least indisposition, fasting and rest: and diluting drinks for a few hours, take a sweat, and if costive [constipated] take purge of two pills every four hours until they operate freely.
4. Unusual costiveness is often the sign of an approaching disease. When you feel it, take one or two of the opening pills.
5. Where salt cannot be had with your meat, steep it a day or two in common lye.
6. In difficult and laborious enterprises or marches, eating sparingly will enable you to bear them with less fatigue and more safety to your health.
7. Washing feet with spirit when chilled, and every morning with cold water.
8. Molasses or sugar with water with vit. [food] and for drink with meals.
9. Shoes without heels.
10. Lying down in a horizontal position when fatigued.

From Flam, Faye. "Medical Frontier." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. February 17, 2003

Did Lewis Have Any Other Medical Training?

The scientific medicine learned from Dr. Rush was the primary medicine practiced on the expedition. It was only when the scientific medicine failed that Lewis resorted to the use of herbal medicine that he had learned from his mother while growing up in Virginia. Lewis's mother had a large herbal garden and was considered a kind of herbal doctor in her community.

Some herbal medicines were also among the items included on Dr. Rush's medical list. Many people today believe that the herbal medicines used on the trip were more effective than the modern medical practices of the time. It has often been said that the members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition survived *in spite of* the scientific treatments they were given!

