

## LEPROSY AND SNAKES

To the EDITOR:

In view of the item published in your April, 1933, number on cobra bite in the treatment of leprosy the following notes may be of interest. In India superstition frequently connects leprosy with snakes. By some sects the snake, particularly the cobra, is worshipped as a god and it is considered a great sin to kill one. If it is done the snake god is expected to avenge the wrong by inflicting leprosy on the culprit, either in the same or in a future incarnation. Conversely, if a man develops leprosy it is said to be because, either in his present life or in a previous incarnation, he has killed a snake.

Superstition also states that a snake never bites a leper naturally, but that if it can be induced to do so the patient will recover. I have known only one case of a leper being bitten by a cobra, but he was an N-1 case, and perhaps the cobra was not skilled in early diagnosis.

Some time ago an Indian Hakim came to me saying that he was treating a number of patients with leprosy by injecting small doses of scorpion venom with excellent results. I did not investigate the matter, but do have the following story on good authority: A patient with severe leprosy was persuaded by relatives to undergo snake-bite treatment. A cobra was secured and by irritation was induced to bite the patient. Some symptoms of poisoning occurred and passed off, the dose of venom not being lethal, but the leprosy continued and did not improve. After some time a second treatment was given, with rapidly fatal results.

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The original cobra-bite story to which this letter refers has more recently reappeared in newspapers in Europe in another dressing. According to this the patients in the leprosy asylum in Athens went on a hunger strike because the physician in charge would not introduce the cobra-bite method of treatment, and

when asked why he would not use it he replied that the cobra would not bite the leper because it was afraid of being poisoned itself.

Another newspaper story has the statement that in Brazil there are "Curators" who practice the cobra-bite treatment of leprosy, and that they even make large non-venomous serpents eat the venomous snakes, which process communicates therapeutic, antivenomous properties to the serum of the former.

—EDITOR.

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