Jesuit Bark

It might surprise you to learn that we have the people of Peru and the Society of Jesus to thank for the successful treatment of malaria. Deirdre Powell, who is a writer and editor with a scientific background, tells the story of Jesuit bark.

An important contribution to medicine was the discovery of Jesuit bark (Pulvis patrum). The bark is the medicinal bark of cinchona trees which is the source of the compound quinine that is used to treat malaria. It gained its name because in the seventeenth century it was the Jesuit missionaries in Peru who made it known to Europeans.

The connection between the Jesuits and this medicinal bark arose between 1620 and 1630, when Spanish Jesuit missionaries in Peru were taught its healing power by the local people. During this time, a Jesuit at Loxa, Peru, suffered an attack of malaria and was cured when treated with the bark. In 1630, the Countess Cinchon, who was the wife of the new Spanish viceroy in Peru, and who had just arrived from Europe, was taken ill with malaria at Lima. At the recommendation of the Jesuits, it was used to treat the countess who was saved from death. Grateful for her recovery, she promoted the collection of large quantities of bark, which was distributed to malaria sufferers. The countess was partly personally responsible for this distribution, as were the Jesuits of St Paul’s College at Lima.

The earliest transportation of the bark is attributed to the Jesuit Barnábé de Cobo (1582–1657), who was involved in the exploration of Mexico and Peru. Fr de Cobo was the procurator of the Peruvian province of his order, and he was responsible for bringing the bark from Lima to Spain, and subsequently to Rome and other parts of Italy, in 1632. Its merits were probably also ascertained in Lima and in other parts of Europe, as Count Cinchon (the Spanish viceroy in Peru)
and his physician Dr Juan de Vega brought it back with them to Europe in 1640.

A faithful advocate of Jesuit bark in Europe from the 1640s to 1660 was the celebrated Jesuit theologian John de Lugo, who became a cardinal in 1643. De Lugo had heard about it from his fellow Jesuit, Bartolomé Tafur, who was the procurator of the Peruvian province of his order. Cardinal de Lugo was a dispenser of the bark in Italy and the rest of Europe. The cardinal also had it analysed by the physician of Pope Innocent X who was Gabriele Fonseca – he reported on it very favourably. The bark was distributed among the sick in Rome on the advice and with the consent of Roman doctors. Under the cardinal’s influence, more was brought from America to Spain via the trade routes. Nearly all the other patrons of the bark at that time seem to have been influenced directly by de Lugo.

The Jesuits were responsible for distributing the bark from Rome throughout Europe. The eighth, ninth and tenth general councils of the order were held in 1646, 1650 and 1652, respectively, and the councils’ delegates returned to their homes, taking some with them. There is also evidence of its use in the Jesuit colleges at Genoa, Lyons, Louvain, and Ratisbon (or Regensburg). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the bark kept in the Jesuit colleges or in Jesuit pharmacies was considered especially efficacious as the priests were better able to supply a genuine, pure drug (quinine). During this time, Jesuit missionaries took the drug to foreign countries where malaria was endemic. One of their success stories involved reaching the court of Peking, where they cured the emperor. Other accomplishments involved urging American collectors to lay out new cinchona tree plantations in Peru during the eighteenth century and the Jesuits were one of the first to plant cinchona outside of South America during the nineteenth century.