Socrates praised olive oil as the “assuager of pain.” In American colonial times, a liniment called opodeldoc was rubbed on to relieve muscular aches. Patent medicines such as Renne’s Magic Oil and Dr. Thomas Electric Oil were sold in the late 1800s for a variety of ailments. Almond oil with a hint of patchouli was a favorite of Esalen practitioners in the 1970s.

The historical record is full of references to topical substances applied with massage. The four most common purposes for these substances were: 1) for their healing properties; 2) their nutritive value; 3) as lubricants; and 4) for luxury or beauty.

Materials used in the past include vegetable oils, powders, animal products (i.e., hog’s lard), petroleum derivatives, liniments, cremes and lotions, and even soapy water. Figure 1 shows a collection of old containers for substances used in medical rubbing and massage from the past 100 years.

Before the word “massage” came into general use in the late 19th century, soft tissue manipulation was variously called friction, rubbing and medical rubbing. Oily or greasy preparations were used with friction to avoid chafing the skin. Unction meant rubbing with only enough effort to apply oily substances, usually for their medicinal properties or nutritive value. In ancient texts, anointing simply meant applying oil or ointment, and implied rubbing the substances on or into the skin.

A closer look at some of the more popular substances used years ago with massage attests to their variety, and to the great care that went into choosing them. Oils and liniments will be the focus of this article.

Botanical Sources
Plants have been by far the single greatest source of topical substances for massage. For thousands of years, oils from plants and botanical remedies have been rubbed into the skin for their healing effects. Massage oils used today are made from many of the same plant sources that have been used for centuries (i.e., almond, olive, coconut and sesame).
rubbing with oil at the ancient gymnasium. In a typical day at the gym in the first century A.D., a citizen athlete would have been rubbed with oil at least twice—once before (tripsis paraskeuastike) and once after (apotherapeia) exercises. A third rubbing might be performed after a bath.

Galen advocated rubbing the whole body before exercises first with a linen cloth as a warm-up, and then rubbing more vigorously with oil. After exercise a larger amount of oil was used with frictions. Galen stated that “since the rubbing must be neither slow nor hard, we must pour oil plentifully over the body of the person who is rubbed, for this contributes both to the quickness and softness of the rubbing; and it enjoys also another advantage, for it relaxes tension and softens the parts which have suffered in the more violent kinds of exertion.” Olive oil, the assuager of pain, would have been plentiful in the Mediterranean area and a likely choice for frictions after exercise at the gymnasium.

India
Massage with oils of various kinds is a key part of ancient Ayurvedic health and healing practices. Ancient texts provide descriptions of several oils made by pressing plant seeds (i.e., mustard, olive, sesame, coconut, almond and castor oil). Combining base oil with a fragrance (i.e., sandalwood, rose or jasmine flowers) makes aromatic oil mixtures.

Herb gardens have provided botanicals used to heal wounds, soothe bruises and sprains, and reduce inflammation. In 16th-century Europe, gardens of “physic” underwent dramatic change as medicinal plants from North America were brought back, and books called herbals were published. One such herbal, entitled “Joyfull Newes out of the Newe Founde Worlde,” was translated from Spanish into English in 1577. These books contained beautiful and detailed drawings of plants, and are prized by collectors today.

Medicinal herbs used to heal wounds included agrimony, elder leaves, garlic bulb, golden rod, hys-sop and yarrow. To treat bruises and sprains, arnica root and flowers, burdock, marigold, wintergreen and witch hazel were used. Comfrey, marshmallow root and violet were applied to reduce inflammation.

Concoctions of herbs and oils have been made for rubbing from time immemorial.

Sumer
Perhaps the earliest written record of friction with plant derivatives is found on a clay tablet from Sumer (present-day southern Iraq) dating from 2100 B.C. “Pass through a sieve and then knead together turtle shells, naga-si plant, salt, and mustard. Then wash the diseased part with beer of good quality and hot water, and rub with the mixture. Then friction and rub again with oil, and put on a poultice of pounded pine.”

Ancient Rome
Galen, a renowned Greek physician and onetime doctor to the gladiators, left a detailed description of the routine of
Medical rubbing in the mid-1800s, it was observed that “old women everywhere use opodeldoc.” The more scientific name for opodeldoc is linimentum saponis camphoratum, or in English, camphorated soap liniment. It was used for rubbing painful muscles, contusions, sprains, sore throat and “other painful afflictions.”

There are several variations on the recipe for opodeldoc, but most contain the same ingredients. Opodeldoc is described in a botanical text of the late 1800s as a combination of powdered soap (castile soap made from soda and olive oil), camphor, oil of rosemary, oil of origanum (aka oil of wild marjoram), ammonia and alcohol.

The recipes for opodeldoc read like cookbooks and are obviously intended for people who are whipping them up from scratch. The recipes give the ingredients, amount to use, the mixing order, and when to shake them in the bottle.

In the post-American Civil War era (1860–1900) patent medicines made from old botanical remedies became readily available through mass production. Trade cards advertising patent oils and liniments were produced in the Victorian era. These 3”x5” card sized advertisements were passed out by merchants and streetwalkers. Trade cards for Dr. Thomas’ Electric Oil and Renne’s Magic Oil are shown in Figure 2a. (See Pages 138 and 139.)

Sloan’s Liniment

“Kills Pain”
Sloan’s Liniment was one of many formulated in the late 1800s, and continues to be produced today. Sloan’s Liniment was created by Earl Sawyer Sloan in the late 1800s, along with his father and a local veterinarian, to treat lameness in horses. Sloan soon discovered that the liniment also worked well to treat human aches and pains.

With his handlebar mustache and bow tie, Sloan is featured prominently on the bottle and box, as shown in Figure 3. Sloan’s Liniment was advertised for rheumatism, arthritis, lameness, and minor strains and sprains. It claimed to offer relief from muscular aches due to overexposure, overwork and fatigue. The active ingredients were extract of capsicum (cayenne pepper), methyl salicylate, camphor oil, turpentine and oil of pine. Although most people think of turpentine in relation to paint thinner, it has been used for muscle aches and pains for centuries. Turpentine is actually a thin, volatile essential oil made from wood or exudates of pine trees.

Petroleum Oil
In the oil-rich Middle East, ancient Persians and Sumerians believed that petroleum had medicinal value. In addition to being used to protect the skin in the desert climate, it was...
used for anointing—that is, as a lubricant for the ancient version of the rubdown.

**Alexander The Great**

In his fascinating biography of Alexander the Great (356–323 B.C.), the Roman historian Plutarch relates an incident about the use of mineral oil by the ancients for recovery from battle. It seems that before an upcoming battle, a servant of Alexander named Prosenius was digging up the ground near the river Oxus to set up the royal pavilion. He hit upon a “sprinkling of a fat oily liquor, which after the top was taken off, ran pure, clear oil, without any difference either of taste or smell, having exactly the same smoothness and brightness, and that, too, in a country where no olives grew.”

Plutarch goes further to say that the river Oxus was known “to be the smoothest to the feeling of all waters, and to leave a gloss on the skins of those who bathed themselves in it.” Alexander’s divers took this as an omen that the victorious Greeks would be won, but that it would be difficult and painful. “For oil,” they said, was bestowed on mankind by God as a refreshment of their labours.” It was considered a good omen that God provided such a valuable means for recovery and healing.

**Lubricants For Massage**

As the old practice of medical rubbing developed into the more sophisticated techniques of modern massage, the use of lubricants was refined. Knorre Ostrom in *Massage and the Original Swedish Massage* (1905) noted that “to avoid abrasions all German and Scandinavian operators use some kind of oleaginous substance.” These included white Vaseline, glycerin, lanolin, lard, olive oil, arnica oil and benzoin ointment. He mentions that in America, “coconut-oil or cocoa-butter” were used freely, and that “some physicians object to using greasy oil of any kind.” Those trained in massage therapy, or massage as treatment, were encouraged to perform “dry rubbing.” The well-known British physician William Murrell advocated dry rubbing for four reasons: 1) to get better contraction of the muscles; 2) to more readily develop electric currents in the tissues; 3) to create more heat in the tissues; and 4) to avoid making a mess of your patient.”

Others weighed in on the subject with Dr. Stretch Dowse, suggesting castor oil and chloroform for cases of painfully stiff joints, and the use of a lubricant for abdominal massage. The label on an old bottle of rubbing oil from Rexall claims “to allay inflammation, to remove soreness and stiffness and to soothe the tired muscles and irritated nerves.” It also contains chloroform. (See Figure 4, opposite page.) Mary McMillan, a pioneer of physical therapy, advocated the use of cod-liver oil or olive oil for its nutritive value when massaging young children. She also mentions cocoa butter and lanolin (an animal product) as “among the best lubricants.”

By mid-20th century, physical therapists had largely given up using massage as a mode of treatment. But massage was still valued by some, like Frances M. Tappan of the University of Connecticut, Department of Physical Therapy Writing in 1961, Tappan summarized the use of lubricants for massage at the time. Lanolin-based cold cream is noted as its moisturizing qualities. Mineral or baby oil might also be used. Cocoa butter may be used on scar tissue caused by burns, and olive oil for skin nutrition. Powder was also mentioned as a lubricant.

When in massage in the natural healing tradition was revived through Islāmī massage in the 1970s, cold-pressed vegetable oils were favored, and continue to be popular among massage therapists today. Manufacturers of these oils have developed a variety of specialty oils and lotions for the unique needs and preferences of massage therapists practicing different techniques and forms of massage.

Producers of oil, lotion and other topical substances for massage therapy carry on a tradition, almost as old as massage itself. Ingredients that have been used for centuries are mixed with the new to provide massage therapists with the topical substances that enhance their work. Producers of oil, lotion and other topical substances for massage therapy carry on a tradition, almost as old as massage itself. Ingredients that have been used for centuries are mixed with the new to provide massage therapists with the topical substances that enhance their work.