

# Arsenic as a Remedy for the Tsetse Bite, 22 March 1858

*Livingstone, David, 1813-1873*

Published by Livingstone Online ([livingstoneonline.org](http://livingstoneonline.org))

[0001]

## 1 ARSENIC AS A REMEDY FOR THE TSETSE BITE.

LETTER FROM DAVID LIVINGSTONE, LL.D.

SIR, – My time was so fully occupied, previous to my departure, in preparation for this expedition, that I could not find a moment's leisure to tell your correspondent Mr. James Braid that the very same idea with respect to the employment of arsenic in the disease which follows the bite of the *tsetse* occurred to my own mind about the year 1847 or 1848. A mare belonging to MR. Gordon Cumming was brought to Kolobeng, after prolonged exposure to the bite of the insect; and, as it was unable to proceed on the journey southward, its owner left it to die. I gave it two grains of arsenic in a little barley daily for about a week, when an eruption resembling small-pox appeared. This induced me to discontinue the medicine; and, when the eruption disappeared, the animal's coat became so smooth and glossy that I imagined I had cured the complaint; for, after the bite is inflicted, the coat stares as if the animal were cold.

The mare, though apparently cured, continued lean. This I was rather glad of, as it is well known between the latitudes 20° and 27° S. that, when a horse becomes fat, he is almost sure to be cut off by a species of pneumonia commonly called the "horse-sickness". About two months after this apparent cure, the coat began to stare again; but this time it had a remarkable dryness and harshness. I tried the arsenic again; but the mare became like a skeleton, and refused to touch the barley. When I tried to coax her, she turned her mild eye so imploringly, and so evidently meaning, "My dear fellow, I would rather die of the disease than of the doctor," that I could not force her. I got her lifted every morning to feed, and saw her at last perish through sheer exhaustion; and this was nearly *six months* after the bite was inflicted.

In my last trip from the Cape up to Linyanti, I was obliged to make some exertion, with but one companion, to get through a part of the country which was flooded by the river Chobe. My men allowed the cattle to stray one night during my absence, and ten died in consequence. Two had been bitten so slightly as not to die like the others. This was contrary to our

previous experience; but when I returned from Loanda, two years afterwards, these two had remained like skeletons, though feeding in rich pasturage.  
[0002]

While thanking Mr. Braid for his hints, I may state that, though my hopes are not very sanguine, I still mean to try the remedy, if opportunity offers. Our instructions require us to examine the whole subject carefully. The result will be communicated to the Royal Society.

Your notice of Dr. Flint's reports, in the Periscope of February 13th, has suggested to my mind that I ought to draw the attention of my medical brethren to the central parts of the Cape Colony, and the interior generally as far as Kolobeng, as presenting a most desirable climate for those threatened with pulmonary complaints. On the coast, we do find consumption among the Hottentots; but even there the climate is not inferior to that of Madeira. Witness the medical reports of the army. The troops, who are placed generally in the least favourable localities, enjoy better health than at any other station except Corfu. The central and western districts; the mission stations Ebenezer, Scheit Fontein, Kurnman, Kolobeng, etc., which are quite removed from the moisture of the ocean, present just the opposite characteristics of climate to those which are believed to favour the development of scrofulous or tuberculous matter; and consumption is quite unknown. Then, as to exercise in the open air, in the way of hunting, botanising, geologising, riding, walking, or even sleeping, there is no country like it. I have always felt the difference sensibly as soon as I came near the sea. Nowhere else will either man or horse go through so much work with so little wear and tear of constitution. I have seen East Indian gentlemen spending fourteen to sixteen hours in the saddle, day after day, who could not have ridden half that time in India without being knocked up; and the only refreshment the horses got was a roll in the sand and the dry grass of the country. All the Indian invalids who came inland were benefited, and, more than that, became enamoured of the climate. It is a mistake to detain patients in the vicinity of the sea who are affected with phthisis. But the expense of going inland is a serious consideration. This would not weigh with patients in the better or higher ranks. A waggon complete, made in the Roggefelt, which would stand the drought, would cost £75; then £40 or £50 for oxen; a good tent, cooking utensils, and a stock of provisions, would require at least £100 more. But then you are independent. A good driver and leader would cost not more than £5 or £6 a month; and, if you follow the less frequented paths, you will find the Dutch farmers all very hospitable and friendly, and, by arrangements with them, you will be allowed to go where fancy may dictate.

If I had any relative affected with lung-disease, I would unhesitatingly prescribe this course, as much more likely to arrest the disease than Madeira; and I am certain that, even though the result might be unfavourable, nowhere else would they have enjoyed so much pleasure. They would be under English law, and get religious sympathy in death and burial.

I am, etc.,

DAVID LIVINGSTONE.

Screw Steamer *Pearl*, at Sea off Senegal, Africa,

March 22nd, 1858.