

Wet Sheet Packs

I thought it might be interesting and, hopefully, somewhat humorous to share another story from my student days at the Missouri State Psychiatric Hospital in St. Louis. If you've ever wondered what student nurses do for fun, you may be surprised by this one.

Part of our training was to experience first-hand some of the treatments the patients might undergo. One of the procedures used to calm very aggressive patients was called a wet sheet pack. In the 60's we didn't have access to many of the current medications used today and resorted to some rather unusual procedures.

A cold, wet sheet acts as a natural sedative to reduce agitation. I found it hard to believe that a wet sheet would work to calm anyone, until the day it was my turn to be wrapped in one. Sheets were folded in a specific manner and kept on hand in a cooler until needed for a patient. In the treatment room the patient was then placed on the table with the wet sheets arranged in a manner, so they could be easily wrapped around the patient. The wrap began at the feet and went up the length of their body. The patient looked like a mummy when all the sheets were wrapped properly. Within a few minutes the sedative effect would kick in and the person would get drowsy and often fall asleep.

When the patient woke up they would usually be much calmer. Many times, they would forget what had upset them. In that case there was no need for medication or other intervention.

The day it was my turn to be put in wet sheet packs by my classmates, they decided it would be great fun to send a psych patient into the room with instructions to give me a kiss, while I lay wrapped helplessly in the sheets. I was laying tightly enclosed like a mummy, relaxed, but not completely asleep, when I heard giggling in the hall.

I opened my eyes and saw a large woman leaning over, ready to plant a sloppy kiss on me. I knew I was unable to move, so immediately started talking and coaxing her to locate something across the room. Since many patients are childlike, they can often be easily distracted. I was fortunate that she happened to be one of them.

She stood up, looked somewhat confused, and glanced at my tormentors peeking in a small window to watch my reaction. They relented from enforcing their prank on me and gently guided her out of the room, so I escaped her gesture of affection.