

THREADS OF HEALTH

Textiles in Medicine and healthcare



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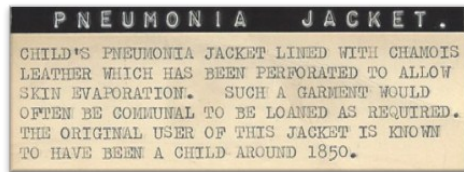
Textiles in Medicine and healthcare

In 2016 the Museum applied to The Textile Society's *Museum, Archive and Conservation Award* in order to carry out a project on a rare mid-19th century child's pneumonia jacket in the collection. The Museum was successful in its grant application which helped to fund:

- Initial research at the Wellcome Collection into the role of textiles in healthcare
- Mounts for displaying original and replica
- Replica pneumonia jacket (with additional mount) for display
- UV film to protect the original from future UV damage



From top left, clockwise: The pneumonia jacket being measured; The replica jacket next to the original jacket; The replica being displayed; the original jacket being boxed to rest



What the Museum found out...

Mr. George Marshall's original catalogue describes the jacket as being used to treat child cases of pneumonia in c1850. Made from red flannel, it is lined with perforated chamois leather and is cut in the fit-and-flare style of its time. A scoping exercise led staff to believe the jacket could be unique within UK collections; pneumonia vests have been identified within collections but nothing specifically for children and nothing so decorative.

While many medical professionals were writing about pneumonia in the early 1800s, without access to modern-day antibiotics or mechanical breathing aids, treatment was limited to contemporary scientific understanding; bloodletting was widespread and the microscope had yet to be accepted as a genuine method of conducting medical diagnoses.

What they thought about best practice:

"...exacerbation of the cough was almost solely induced by the horizontal position."
"[There is]...danger of pneumonia being increased if you chill the surface of the body." *"[If someone] in this susceptible condition be subjugated to cold or damp (...) inflammation will almost certainly be set up."* *"Poultice of linseed meal (...) should be applied across the back from the top of the shoulder blade to the middle of the back every three or four hours."* *"...apply one, two, or more leeches to the chest of the child, according to its age."*

Other remedies included a tartar emetic, antimony, digitalis, stimulants, beef tea and mustard plasters.

It's easy to conclude that a fitted jacket could, by its very nature, restrict a child's movement helping to keep them *"...in a semi-recumbent posture in the arms, or propped in bed."* Buttoned to the neck, it could also regulate temperature while keeping a poultice in place. By 1867 advice was to give warm water formentation instead of poultices, and to keep it in place with *"...a flannel bandage of sufficient length and breadth [and] a roller of Mackintosh waterproof cloth to cover the flannel."* This was found to be *"...much better liked by the child"* so a handmade jacket could provide the same level of comfort with the capability to reuse.

What the Museum found out...

Considering clothing for health purposes, it was generally agreed that attention should be paid to material as well as form. And for pneumonia *"...in order to prevent the natural heat of the body from passing off too rapidly, a texture is required which shall convey it slowly, and radiate it with difficulty."*

"There is not a more useful piece of clothing in our variable climate than chamois leather worn next the skin, or what is better, over cotton or flannel."

There were many proponents of flannel and chamois leather:

"[Flannel has] the combination of qualities best adapted for the protection of the young from the effects of cold."

"If liable to pain in any particular part, that may be aided by (...) the wearing of flannel next to the skin."

"[Flannel] is a slow conductor of external heat to the body, and (...) easily attracts internal heat [allowing] it to evaporate more readily."

[Flannel] keeps the vessels of the skin constantly open, causes them to perspire freely, and admits but a very small degree of external moisture."

"Of Chamois Leather – I cannot speak too highly to the convalescent, the gouty and rheumatic."

Benjamin Franklin's first recorded experiment raised questions about each colour's ability to absorb heat, which resulted in the discovery that darker colours absorbed more heat than lighter colours. This eventually led to the idea that perspiration helped to reduce the heat of the body. So, by the early 1800s it was widely accepted that *"The property of receiving, repelling, and emitting heat and cold, depends not only on the substance from which the dress is made (...) but also on the colour..."* and as the colour red has always been associated with warmth, it follows that the jacket's maker might have considered the extra potential healing properties.

As a final comment, Strange's *Restoration of Health* suggests that *"...the outer garment should be of (...) dark colours, with white under-clothing. The rule is applicable with still greater force to the case of invalids, children and old people...."*



**GEORGE MARSHALL
MEDICAL MUSEUM**
250 Years of Medical History



For display purposes, the Museum will be rotating the original pneumonia jacket with the replica. Please speak to Museum staff if you wish to see the original and it is not currently displayed. For a file of further research completed for the Threads of Health project, please ask Museum staff.