

Y2K

Joseph W. Burnett, MD

A time capsule will be launched shortly containing comparative lists of XX Century “happenings” assembled for the advent of the third millennium. Humanity has seen progress from the horse to the rocket ship, from the telegraph to e-mail, and from the pony express to cell phones. Medicine, too, has progressed by giant leaps and bounds during the past century. One hundred years ago, blood letting was common, anesthesia was in its infancy, and vaccines were primitive. During the last century, phlebotomy has been severely curtailed and inhalation gases, barbiturates, and salicylates have been finely tuned. New advances in antimicrobial and chemotherapeutic agents have been made. The use of blood banks has increased and intravenous catheters were developed. These advancements allowed physicians to practice crude, but good, medicine with ether, morphine, penicillin, phenobarbital, digitalis, and acetylsalicylic acid.

Dermatology has also benefited from the scientific advances made during the past century. At the beginning of the 1900s, bland ointments and balms without significant therapeutic additives abounded. Eventually, lidocaine and its predecessors were developed. After World War II, corticosteroids, antibiotics, and antifungals arrived. Over the past 40 years, light therapy and retinoid chemistry were added to the dermatologist’s armamentarium. Isotretinoin, a remarkable drug for cystic acne, arrived with predictable but manageable side effects. It remains one of the few pharmacologic agents whose results the physician can practically guarantee. Very good dermatology can now be practiced with only antibiotics, antifungals, cortisone products, and lidocaine—all different agents than those available just a century ago. Perhaps many of the agents mentioned above should be included in the time capsule.

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, we see the development of biotechnology, gene therapy, and computer technology. Will these be the big events for future years or will others appear by serendipity? The editorial staff and I hope you will all stick around as long as possible to find out!