Think back to those days as a medical student and a new house officer. How could you possibly learn about all of the medical problems you would encounter? What were the right medicines to give? What doses should one use? The breadth of medicine then (and more so now) was so intimidating. Fortunately, I had a good friend then—known simply as the Merck Manual. It could usually save the day, no matter how difficult the problem. Well, that old friend just turned 100 years old. The facts are impressive.

First published in 1899 (192 pages), the Merck Manual’s 17th edition was just published in 1999 as the Centennial Edition (2,833 pages) (1). Over this century, more than 10 million copies have been sold, making it the most widely used medical textbook in the world. With the centennial edition, one also gets a facsimile copy of the 1899 edition. I was very interested in reviewing some of the up-to-date knowledge of heart problems and their treatment. Some examples follow:

Under “angina pectoris,” there were 30 remedies listed, three of which were nitrites: amyl nitrate, sodium and potassium nitrite and nitroglycerin. Some of the other 27 were quite interesting. Among them were cocaine, digitalis, strychnine in small doses, chloroform, morphine, ether plus opium and turpentine oil applied locally to the chest.

For apoplexy (presumed cerebrovascular accident)aconite was given to lower blood pressure and prevent further hemorrhage. Of the other 20 remedies, interesting ones included venesection or leeches to lower blood pressure, ice to the head and mustard plaster to the feet.

For palpitation of the heart, there were 22 recommendations. Some might have been helpful, such as amyl nitrite, belladonna, digitalis, breath holding and potassium. Some less conventional remedies included eucalyptus, cocaine, camphor and lead.

For dropsy (probably mostly), there were 78 remedies. There were five digitalis preparations: digitalin, digitalis, digitoxin, squill and strophanthus. Several “diuretics” were touted, including antihydropin, a crystalline extract from cockroaches, cathartics and abdominal paracentesis. The Manual also said “gamboge never to be used!”—one of the few prohibitions in the book.

There were 25 remedies for syncope. Potentially useful ones were “head lowest and feet raised,” digitalis, atropine and stimulants such as amyl nitrite. Others included “cold douche” and “heat to epigastrium.”

This brief survey of the 1899 edition reminds us of the dramatic changes in medicine that have occurred over the past century. The changes in the past 36 years since I graduated from medical school seem almost as dramatic. One can barely fathom the changes that will occur in the Merck Manual over the next century. Will physicians look back at the 17th edition in the same way as we look back at the first edition? I am sure they will be amazed at some of the medicines and techniques we currently embrace. Listed below is a whimsical entry in the Merck Manual of 2099. By the way, it is part of a small chip containing all of the world’s knowledge accessible on the wrist TCS (total communications system).

Translated into English from CGL (common galactic language):

“Coronary artery disease: of historical interest only. It was the number one killer in the 20th century. The universal advent of transgenic therapy eliminated the disease almost 50 years ago, at the same time apoptosis was eliminated and life span doubled. As impossible as it is to believe, it used to be treated by placing cylindrical metal stents inside the coronary arteries. (See section on Total Noninvasive Diagnostic Techniques and Therapy. Also see section on Martian War Syndrome.).”

Correspondence: William W. Parmley, MD, Editor-in-Chief, Journal of the American College of Cardiology, 415 Judah St, San Francisco, California 94122.

REFERENCE