Laughter the best medicine comes in liquid form. Doc’s Spoonful of Medicine.

#12. Yes. Welcome to Fletton, BABY.

As I enjoy my third decade in General Medical Practice, which I prefer to think of as “Family Doctoring”, preceded by a decade in General and Paediatric Surgery, I occasionally look at babies and wonder what they would say, if they could complain about some of the well-intentioned inadvertent mistreatment metered out to them in the first year of life.

Right from the delivery room, some babies get “washed” before being handed to their mothers and especially if they need to be in an incubator for medical reasons. While in the womb, the baby is covered by a special barrier on the skin, to stop the skin getting waterlogged or wrinkled, as happens to us later in life, when we fall asleep in the bath for too long. Washing off this protective barrier exposes the baby’s skin to irritants and allergens, and is thought by some, to be one of the reasons why some eczema is worse than others. There are of course other factors such as the genetic mutation in a special protein called “Filaggrin”, which is crucial for the integrity and resilience of the surface of skin; but why wash the baby anyway? Mother is already a mixture of blood, sweat and tears, getting the baby out safely. What problem is a baby that is not “squeaky clean”? “Just let me get on with latching onto the breast for my antibody laden colostrum, Mamma.” Similarly bubble baths damage the natural skin oil (called “sebum”) and predisposes to eczema and skin infection. To make bubbles you need detergent (aka “Fairy Liquid”, other brands being available), to change the surface tension. Actually, the best additive for baby’s bath, is two or three tablespoons of salt and a teaspoon of almond Oil (“Johnson’s baby oil”, other brands etc, etc), recreating the sort of liquid environment in which the skin developed. Then let them play with the packaging of that bubble bath you got as a gift. That is what I did with my babies, all born after we came to live in Mereside, incidentally. Boy, did they love Fletton!

Then there is bashing of the back called “burping the baby”. Since air rises in a bottle of liquid even after shaking, all that is required is to hold the baby upright after feeds, cradled against your tummy (or your side) and the gas will rise to cause a burp, naturally. If the baby lies horizontally the gas just rises to the top of the side of the stomach and not the exit, like a bottle on its side.

The relatively large head of a bay is essential for heat loss, so covering a baby’s head with a nice-looking hat when the baby is in a warm room makes little sense, especially if the baby is mounting a useful fever to combat viral illness. That just causes discomfort. By the way, fever is important in healing; so over-enthusiastic Paracetamol of Ibuprofen targeted at the number on the thermometer can be counter-productive, delaying dealing with the common cold Coronavirus. Luckily, babies seem inexplicably immune to the new Coronavirus (CoVid-19), but the same applies. So, I advise only using the medicine for pain relief (for say earache or sore throat), till the late evening, when our temperatures rise fastest, but only to enable sleep, not to lower the number per se. The fear of “febrile convulsion” is behind this strange behaviour of modern times. Our ancestors used to wrap our bodies warm to “sweat out infections” with a high core temperature, but a cool head, to be comfortable. In fact, “febrile convulsions can happen at ANY level of fever and are not related to the number on the thermometer, but to a genetic predisposition. They are not that common compared to the number of many millions of baby fever episodes and are rarely harmful, just disturbing for anxious parents. Likewise, the hallucinations of some primary school children when feverish.

We are all born knowing only life. We hope for wisdom from grown-ups to teach us the rest. I hope I have been of some assistance. I do strongly advise teaching babies to love Fletton and The POSH.