



In the Roxburgh cemetery is this beautiful headstone which records 'In affectionate remembrance of the beloved children of Jabez and Jane Burton, John Sydney aged 1 year and 5 months and Catherine Mary aged 3 years 11 months, who both died of diphtheria(sic) on Sunday morning 30th December 1883. Many gravestones record the death of multiple children over a short period but, in the age of poorly understood diseases and epidemics, it is unusual to find the cause of death engraved on the stone. Folk cures abounded.

In May 1890 the *Otago Witness* carried an article titled "Diphtheria" in which readers offered the following help for sufferers:

Put a teaspoonful of sulphur into a wineglass of water, and stir it with a finger instead of a spoon, as the sulphur does not readily amalgamate with the water. When the sulphur is well-mixed it is to be given to the patient to gargle, and after gargling to swallow it, and in 10 minutes the patient will be out of danger.

When the fungus is too nearly closing to allow the gargling, the flower of brimstone should be blown through a quill into the throat, and after the fungus has shrunk to allow of it, then the gargling. If the patient cannot gargle, take a live coal and sprinkle a teaspoonful of flower of brimstone on it, let the sufferer inhale it by holding the head over the shovel, and the fungus will die. Brimstone kills every species of fungus in man, beast, and plant, in a few minutes.

And again from *The Australian* from a correspondent who has had a great experience with her children when attacked by this fell disease: - Take a lump of fresh lime about 8 pound weight and slake in boiling water; hold the child over the fumes for about three minutes, and make it open its mouth. This remedy was tried in four bad cases with marked success.

Prior to immunisation diphtheria was a major scourge and childhood killer. There was an epidemic in Dunedin in early 1890 that occurred at the same time as the opening of the first Dunedin Exhibition. An article in the *Tuapeka Times* accused the Dunedin newspapers of keeping the news of an epidemic very quiet in order to continue to encourage country people to attend the Exhibition. There may be some truth in the claims as information about this outbreak is very hard to find.

Diphtheria is an upper respiratory tract infection of the nose throat and upper air passages that can be fatal. It is a contagious disease spread by either direct physical contact or breathing the droplets from the coughing or sneezing of an infected person. According to newspaper articles of the times people believed that outbreaks of diphtheria were caused by both cats and unclean milk.

In the late 19th century, Emil von Behring developed an antitoxin serum to neutralise the toxic poison build up in the body of diphtheria sufferers. Emil von Behring was to become the first winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine (1901) for his ground-breaking work in reversing the scourge of diphtheria.