

Alberta Doctors' Digest

The demise of the pocket handkerchief

As the pathogens of the cold and flu season re-arm and assemble for their annual invasion and occupation of the upper respiratory tracts of this great nation, a cri de coeur and a plea for clemency for the decline – if not the demise – of the pocket handkerchief is overdue.

My dear friend, colleague and fellow poet, Edmonton's Dr. John Boyd, obstetrician and gynecologist, has made an impassioned yet reasoned appeal on behalf of this dying fragment of a soggy past – that now rarely seen item of clothing, that useful rescuer of unexpected nasal drips, that crumpled fabric ball of mucus shyly tucked under the cuff of a woolen sleeve or ignominiously sunk damp into a trouser pocket – the handkerchief. And who has not yearned for the soft feel of a cotton hanky to remove a tenacious glop of nasal gunk rather than the harsh scratch of a thin paper tissue so easily perforated by the searching digit?

John's salty, whimsical paeon was broadcast to a rasping, tissue-addicted audience on the CBC *Sunday Edition* radio show with Michael Enright on April 20, 2018.

In the great tradition of medical authors and poets – Rabelais, Chekhov, Conan Doyle, Somerset Maugham, Cronin, Carlos Williams, et al – it's a pleasure to widen the audience and readership of "To a Handkerchief" by Dr. John Boyd. For full-enjoyment, the piece should be read aloud to sniffling children or snotty grandchildren assembled by the fireside on a cold winter's evening.



Dr. John Boyd muses: "Can you imagine, Pavarotti, that larger than life figure, mopping his glistening brow with a paper tissue?" (photo credit: Marvin Polis)

To a handkerchief

[\(click to listen on CBC Radio\)](#)

As far back as I can remember I have always had a handkerchief in my trouser pocket, a useful and comforting presence.

My mother always kept a pile of carefully ironed handkerchiefs downstairs, in the corner of a drawer. In my 1940s Glasgow boyhood, our mothers did everything. Laundry was done by hand, wrung out and hung on an outside line, winter and summer. Coal fires were our only heat and required constant labor. Then there was the ironing and, of course, the almost daily shopping on foot. No plastic or fancy paper packaging. In fact, there were very few paper items in the house, apart from bathroom essentials and wallpaper decorating nearly every room. No packets of paper tissues and no kitchen paper towels.

The responsibilities and life of women in the household has changed enormously over the years largely due to the liberating influence of the washing machine, the fridge and the birth control pill. Despite these changes, my love of the handkerchief has not waned; I would feel naked without one.

Nowadays, when I produce my useful nasal duster, I get "oohs" of disgust from my Canadian family and friends. I gently respond asking them to show me what they have. If they have anything at all, it's often a small crumpled ball of paper tissue which has been used a few times. These little paper items are quite useless if a nose blow is needed after a moist sneeze. This lack sometimes leads to the dreaded hawking, a truly

stomach-churning noise. Or worse, their sneezes are concealed in the corner of an elbow; surely the origin of the old tune “Greensleeves.”



Paper tissues left in the pockets of items in the laundry can create a wintry scene with little white specs everywhere (photo credit: Tabeajaichhalt, pixabay.com).

Paper tissues left in the pockets of items in the laundry can create a wintry scene with little white specs everywhere. Doing a washing, I once (and only once) left a ballpoint pen in a shirt pocket with quite the opposite color effect!

Allow me to share with you the many values of the handkerchief.

The most important, of course, is hygiene and personal care in dealing with coughs, colds, sneezes and drips. During the acute wet and most infectious stage of a cold, I always carry several handkerchiefs. The resulting damp, used ones hide in a deep pocket.

Embarrassment can be avoided at concerts. An unexpected cough or sneeze can be muffled. Conductors hate these barky interruptions, which of course only happen during quiet passages in the music.

The cleaning of eye glasses. This, of course, is only if the handkerchief is relatively unused, to avoid smearing – quite the opposite of seeing the world through rose-colored spectacles. The breast pocket handkerchief is the ideal cleanser for this purpose.

No trees are sacrificed in the making of handkerchiefs which are either linen, cotton or silk. They can be continually reused by washing in the weekly laundry and then nicely

ironed into quarters. Ironing is, I suspect, a dying art as I often see many crumpled unironed garments abroad, mostly men's shirt collars.

Cuts and scrapes on limbs and digits can be bound temporarily with our touted item. No harm should arise even if the handkerchief has been used.

Handkerchiefs are wonderful for waving, either for attention or for help – let us hope never for the wish to surrender, unless in accepting defeat thus peacefully ending an acrimonious home discussion about the merits and demerits of handkerchiefs or paper tissues.

A nice suit or evening wear can be enhanced with a handkerchief in the top or breast pocket. This is usually formal white and should not have the appearance of an unposted letter. It must have carefully fluted peaks. Colored silk or patterned handkerchiefs also add pizzazz to a semi-formal suit, sport coat or blazer.

Tiny grandchildren can have their sticky fingers and noses wiped or tears dried or “owies” tended to with this gentle item.

Can you imagine, Pavarotti, that larger than life figure, mopping his glistening brow with a paper tissue?

Distraught golfers can steady their minds by drying their tears before standing, trembling, over that dreaded fourth putt; their once perfect round now ruined.

An unfortunate spill at sensitive social events can be mopped. Messed shoes may also be cleaned if an important interview or social appearance is to be endured. These hankies may need disposal.

Monty Python fans will remember the use of a handkerchief with a knot at each corner as headgear at the seaside to prevent sun damage to scalps with thinning hair. This covering is the ideal accompaniment with rolled-up trouser legs if an adventure in sea wading is risked.

Finally, I would like to mention a use which may help your favorite friends to quit smoking – no easy task. Ask them to light a cigarette, take a puff and do not inhale. Blow the smoke through a white handkerchief. There will be a large, dark brown stain. Take another puff, but this time inhale and again blow through the handkerchief next to the first stain. This one will be a very light brown. The missing residue is in the body, poisoning and shortening life.

And there I rest my case, my crusade for the proper and proud possession and use of a good-sized cloth handkerchief for hygiene, elegance and so many other things. I even suspect that our dear Queen Elizabeth II would agree with me. I feel sure she keeps a beautifully embroidered handkerchief, emblazoned with a royal coat of arms, in her ever-present handbag. A wise woman.

- Dr. John J. Boyd, Edmonton, 2018

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