

ALLERGY

HERRMANN VON HELMHOLTZ ON THE CURE OF HAYFEVER

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It was difficult to find but I knew it should be there: a letter of Herrmann von Helmholtz about his private attempt to cure hay fever. Published in the increasingly [important Nature magazine](#) on [May 14, 1874](#) von Helmholtz [describes the vibrio like bodies in his own nasal fluid](#) and the successful local treatment with quinine.

*AN EXPERIMENTAL OBSERVATION ON HAY FEVER**

“ **T**HE accompanying brief but most interesting paper was received a day or two ago. Believing that it may bring relief to those who during the coming warm weather may be attacked with hay fever, Prof. Tyndall forwards it, with his compliments, to the editor of NATURE.”

From what I have observed (says Prof. Binz) of recent English publications on the subject of hay fever, I am led to suppose that English authorities are inaccurately acquainted with the discovery of Prof. Helmholtz, as far back as 1868, of the existence of uncommon low organisms in the nasal secretions in this complaint, and of the possibility of arresting their action by the local employment of quinine. I therefore purpose to republish the letter in which he originally announced these facts to myself, and to add some further observations on this topic. The letter is as follows† :—

“ I have suffered, as well as I can remember, since the year 1847, from the peculiar catarrh called by the English ‘hay fever,’ the speciality of which consists in its attacking its victims regularly in the hay season (myself between May 20 and the end of June), that it ceases in the cooler weather, but on the other hand quickly reaches a great intensity if the patients expose themselves to heat and sunshine. An extraordinarily violent sneezing then sets

Unfortunately there is a [consecutive letter](#) that did not confirm this effect. I also do not know how this treatment would have worked. Fiction, placebo or true antiparasitic side-effect? We even know of quinine induced allergy, making even reverse causation possible.

G. Kanny, J. Flabbée, M. Morisset M, D. Moneret Vautrin. Allergy to quinine and tonic water. Eur J Intern Med 14 (2003), p. 395-396.
R. Cundall, Idiosyncrasy to quinine in bitter lemon. Br Med J 20 (1964), p. 1638.