



# Charms, Prayers, Concoctions, and Pilgrimages:

## The Effectiveness of Learned Medicine versus Common Medicine in the Medieval Ages



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### Abstract

Medical history has recently been growing as a field of study due to the strong advancements occurring in medicine. Many have studied the progression of modern medicine from Ancient History through to the Renaissance, but little attention has been given to the true effectiveness of medicine right before it was transformed within the 16th and 17th centuries. In analyzing the success of medieval medicine on the patient, we can start to understand the evolution of healing since the first recitations of the Hippocratic Oath. Through the use of popular medieval texts like *Stere Htt Well*, *The Mirror of James Roig*, and *The Medieval Women's Guide to Health*, this research will look at whether the learned or common healing practices in the medieval ages (religion, astrology, humorism, and midwifery) were effective. The thoughts of other historians are split between whether or not these practices were actually successful, but it is through the documented opinions of the patient for us to find the truth. Although it is difficult to know whether or not the patients' judgments have been altered by bias, there are still efforts being made to find the true voices of these hidden in the medicinal contracts that still survive.

### Learned Medicine

The Process of gaining a medical degree in the Medieval Ages:

- Attend university for (at least) four years to receive your bachelor's degree in the seven liberal arts tiered into two categories: the trivium (in which grammar, logic and rhetoric were placed) and quadrivium (where arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music fell into)
- If going for a medical, or law, degree, one would attend University for up to an additional ten years!
- Medical learn was based on a mostly lecture based foundation, where students would discuss and debate the medicinal practices and ideas of the Greek Classics
- The practicing of medicine to gain experience was looked down upon by learned physicians, since instances varied so often, it was better just to know different methods and ideas on a subject than anything else.

Popular Practices and ideas amongst the Learned:

- **Humoralism**: the study of the bodily ("natural") or environmental ("unnatural") influences in a person's life. There were four main humors (blood, phlem, bile, and black bile [vomit]) and the idea of balance was key to the prescription of treatments in licensed and common practices. Methods to keep the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (the body) balanced include:
  - Blood-letting if one was thought to be "too hot"
  - Astrology, to figure out what should be diagnosed and treated given the placement of the stars on the given day of a person's birth or illness
  - Restrictions or change to daily activities, if a person was ill because of "too much exercise", then he should refrain from sex, or if the air was 'foul', one should move or travel to a place with sweet airs
- **Religion**: Especially at the University of Salerno (the first medical university in Europe), religious men would earn degrees in medicine, and vice versa, contributing to the strong bond between medicine and God. Physicians would use the word of God, miracles, pilgrimages, and prayers as ways to heal the patient's mind to hopefully heal the body. This was usually the case if the illness was not known to the physician, it was too vague to figure out, or if the doctor did not have anything else to offer to the patient.
- **Brews**: learned physicians, as well as common doctors, would usually create an antidote to suit the patient, which brings about some downfalls to the use of apothecaries. If a physician were to create a successful potion for one patient, the tedious calculations to try and recreate it for another were very difficult. Many treatments were so far-fetched in their complexity and possible harm towards the patient (ie: theraic), that they themselves were skeptical of the practices.



Location of Salerno, the hub of Medieval Medicine



Fetal Positions from The Medieval Woman's Guide to Health

### Common Healing

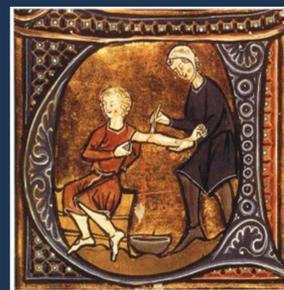
The Process of Gaining Knowledge for Common Healers:

- Common healers had little to no schooling, they learned by being either apprentices to other healers, or, in some cases, used the growing number of texts in the vernacular (that some have written based off learned techniques) to gain their knowledge (ie: *Stere Htt Well*?)
- It is difficult to trace back information on the practices of common healing since many of these physicians did not write down their practices; this research is only based on the written texts that could be salvaged
- One of the most popular forms of common healing that has been written about from the Medieval Ages is midwifery

Effectiveness of Midwifery in Medieval Ages

- Midwifery was a very controversial topic amongst common and learned healers. It was thought to be cursed or evil since many men did not know what went on when females were giving birth. They thought it mystical, and thus thought only women should deal with a woman's problems.
- One of the popular anti-feminist texts of the time was *The Mirror of Jaume Roig*<sup>1</sup>, written by a licensed physician who writes heavily against women and womanly ailments in general.
- The first gynecological text that survives is the *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health*<sup>3</sup>, thought to be written by the first woman professor of medicine, Trotula.
  - The text goes in depth about the different ailments, reasons for these issues, and their treatments for the female body
  - Images of the different ways a baby can be in the wrong position during childbirth are provided
  - A deep analysis about the health of the female body and how it differs from men is given
- I relied heavily on this text, since it was the only complete work of common healing I could find written in a script of Middle English I could read. Of course this does not represent the actual knowledgebase and success of common healing; it does give a taste of the fact that common healing (though not written down and was thought lowly upon by others) was effective.

Astrology Calendar



Blood-letting



Alchemical Miscellany (1350)

### Patient's Perspective

With the archive I am using being so spotty and difficult to interpret (since many of the authentic learned texts are in Latin), it is difficult to solidify whether either or both of these groups had effective methods of healing patients. That is why I turned to the records of the patients to decide if there was an answer.

What I found:

- It was popular between physicians and patients to draw up contracts to set the terms of payment, the duration of treatment, and the criteria for recovery (usually allowing the patient some say over these). Occasionally they also specified the patient's role in the treatment (ie: special diets)
- It was common practice (and law in places like Bologna) where the physician was not paid until the patient was healed
- It was common for patients to bring their physician to court because the illness would come back or because the physician was paid too soon
- Many patients would ask for the input of other healers on their illness and treatment to see whether or not they are truly healed
- Because of this, the patient bias towards healers in general could have been very skewed. Other physicians may have lied to bring more business to themselves, the patient may not have enjoyed the treatment so they would say they are not healed...ect
- The determination for 'effectiveness' was solely on the patient, thus it is quite a relative experience for every patient.

### Conclusion

With the effectiveness of modern medicine being so high, it is difficult to perceive a time when the chances of surviving an illness was a chancy as getting a seven when rolling dice. Although learned physicians were trained for up to ten years in university, the experience was solely lecture and theory based more than anything else. The studying of the stars, the humors of the body, and even one's urine did lead to certain acknowledgements of the way a body worked, but the practices were far from perfect. Even with actual concoctions, the measurements were so tedious and variable it was difficult for complete success. The incorporation of God as a healer may have quelled the anxiety a patient may have or lead them to believe a miracle has happened, adding to the belief there was effectiveness of these practices. Common healers worked by experience and word of mouth, but the increasing literacy and use of the vernacular in texts, like *The Woman's Guide to Health* may have benefited those that could afford a copy. The documentation of actual healing examples are far spread and scarce, but through the contracts between healer and patient, historians have been able to piece together that learned doctors were not any better than common doctors, or vice versa, due to the heavy contribution of the patient's experience with a healer. Though the path to the answer of this question is still foggy from inconsistent textual remains and strong bias of patients, it can be concluded that both were effective in some way, but not nearly as effective as the times to come once the Renaissance started to blossom.

### Selected References

- <sup>1</sup>Delgado-Librero- Maria. *The Mirror of Jaume Roig: An Edition and an English Translation of MS. Vat. Lat. 4806*. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University, 2010.
- <sup>2</sup>Hodgett, Gerald A. *Stere Htt Well: A Book of Medieval Refinements, Recipes, and Remedies from a Manuscript in Samuel Pepys's Library*. Cambridge, UK: Magdalen College, 1972.
- <sup>3</sup>Rowland, Beryl. *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health: The First Gynecological Handbook with an Introduction and Modern English Translation*. Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1981.