

History, Medicine through time

Lesson 4 of 30

Worksheet:

Who did people go to for medical help in medieval times?

Mr Prudden



Physicians

The main role of a physician was to **diagnose** illness and recommend a course of treatment.

The physician would study the colour of their patient's **urine** and compare it to a chart. He would also consult **astrological charts** under which the patient was born and at the time they fell sick. Based on this, the physician would create a course of treatment.

It was then up to less trained and lower paid professionals such as barber surgeons to carry out the treatment. For most of this period, this was due to the fact that many physicians were clergymen, who from 1215 were forbidden from carrying out any procedures such as **bleeding**.

Physicians were very expensive. Royalty and the very wealthy often employed a physician full time.



Apothecaries

Apothecaries mainly mixed herbal remedies. They had good knowledge of the healing powers of herbs and plants thanks to studying herbal manuals such as ***Materia Medica***. They usually had a good amount of knowledge from their own experience, or passed down from family members.

Apothecaries were not considered as skilled or knowledgeable as physicians. Physicians prescribed the medication and apothecaries were just there to mix the remedy.

They also made their own medicines to sell to the sick, and since physicians were expensive and apothecaries were cheaper, lots of people would see an apothecary as an alternative to a physician. This meant that physicians saw them as a threat to their livelihood.



Surgeons

Barber surgeons were probably the least qualified medical professionals in England. Because good barbers had sharp knives and a steady hand, they regularly performed small surgeries as well, such as pulling teeth and **bleeding** patients.

In medieval England, a skilled surgeon could set a broken limb, remove an arrow or even successfully remove **cataracts** from the eyes to restore or improve sight.

There was no effective **anaesthetics** but occasionally they had to **amputate** a limb or remove painful bladder stones.



Women

Most people in the Middle Ages would have been treated at home by a female family member. Women did most of the treatment at home, caring for the sick and mixing remedies themselves. Women would be responsible for the garden, in which they were expected to grow various plants known for their healing properties, such as marigolds and clover.

Sometimes the local wise woman or lady of the manor was called to use her skills and knowledge.

Women also acted as **midwives**. Women could qualify as surgeons by working as apprentices, but were not allowed to become physicians.



Medieval surgery

Surgeons improved their techniques and instruments through practice.

Example 1: A skull discovered in Yorkshire belonged to a man who'd been hit, leaving bone splinters in the brain. A medieval surgeon cut a hole, removed the splinters and the man survived the operation.

Example 2: A surgeon saved **King Henry V** when, as a 16-year-old prince in 1403, he was wounded in battle. An arrow pierced his cheek and penetrated to the base of his skull. The royal surgeon, **John Bradmore**, knew that pieces of arrow in the wound would poison and kill the prince. So he designed metal forceps to pass through the wound, take hold of the arrowhead and pull it out. With the forceps, he removed the arrowhead and dressed the wound for three weeks with clean linen, barley and honey, which kept the wound free of **infection**. The wound healed.



Medieval surgery

A '**wound man**' was a common illustration, showing surgeons how to deal with different wounds.

However, surgeons could not do complex surgery inside the body. They did not have enough knowledge of **anatomy**, nor effective **anaesthetics**. They used herbs such as opium or hemlock to make patients drowsy but risked putting the patient to sleep permanently.

Wine, vinegar or honey were used to clean wounds, but could not prevent infections spreading or stop heavy bleeding.

There was some further progress in dealing with infection after surgery. As seen with Example 2, surgeons were now cleaning wounds and using bandages soaked in wine to dress them. This challenged the idea of **Galen's** that pus in a wound was a sign that it was healing.



Medieval hospitals

By 1500, there were an estimated 1,100 hospitals in England ranging in size from just a few beds to hundreds.

About **30%** of the hospitals in England were run by the Church. These were run by **monks** and **nuns** who lived in nearby **monasteries**. The rest were funded by wealthy people who left money in their will for the setting up of a hospital.

However, hospitals in the Middle Ages didn't actually treat the sick. Instead, they offered hospitality, which is how hospitals got their name. Therefore very few hospitals employed physicians or surgeons. The Church believed that diseases had been sent by God as a punishment for sin, so only prayers could cure it.



Medieval hospitals

The space would have been kept very clean by **nuns** and the bed linens and clothing of the patients changed regularly. This meant that, for people not suffering from terminal disease, hospitals were probably quite successful.

Infectious patients were rejected from hospitals as prayer could do nothing for these people. Insane and unmarried pregnant women were often rejected, though some hospitals had special beds reserved for unmarried mothers.

Remember, the vast majority of sick people were cared for at home by a female family member.



Glossary

- **Amputate** To remove a limb by surgery.
- **Anaesthetic** A drug or drugs given to produce unconsciousness before and during surgery.
- **Anatomy** The science of understanding the structure and make-up of the body.
- **Bleeding** The treatment of opening a vein or applying leeches to draw blood from the patient.
- **Cataracts** When the lens in the eye develops cloudy patches causing blurry, misty vision and eventually blindness.
- **Diagnosis** The identification of the nature of an illness or other problem by examination of the symptoms.



Glossary

- **Infection** The formation of disease-causing germs or microorganisms.
- **Midwives** People who are trained to help women in childbirth.
- **Monastery** A building occupied by a community of monks living under religious vows.
- **Monks** A member of a religious community of men.
- **Nuns** A member of a religious community of women.



Comprehension Questions

1. What was the main role of a physician?
2. Why did lots of people see an apothecary rather than a physician?
3. Give three ways women provided medical help.
4. Give two similarities and two differences between medieval and modern hospitals.
5. Challenge question: How far do you agree that surgery improved in medieval times?

You could use the following sentences to help structure your answer

There were improvements in surgery during medieval times. For example...

However, there were reasons preventing surgery from improving, for example...

Overall, I mostly agree that...

