

## **Nurses, Laundresses, Midwives, Wise Women: Medieval Women as Healers - Dr. Joy Hawkins**

Dr. Hawkins returned to the Beccles U3A to give another interesting talk, this time on the role of women in healthcare in the Middle Ages. She is a Lecturer in Humanities teaching at the UEA.

Much attention has been paid to the medieval physician and surgeon, but behind the scenes, there was a whole host of female healers, mopping up bodily fluids and providing herbal remedies for every ache, pain and illness. If you found shelter in a medieval hospital, it would be a nurse who was your sole carer. Whilst the female head of the household was expected to care for both her family and servants, treating everything from dog bites to dysentery on a daily basis.

Midwives learned their craft from other women within their communities and from their own childbearing experiences, because there was a lack of training within the field. Thus midwives often taught upcoming midwives through their personal experience. From the time they were small girls, women who would later become midwives were present at the births of other siblings and they observed the birthing process performed by the midwife or other female family members. Commonly the midwife's tools included scissors, linens, trays, baskets, and a birthing stool. Men were not allowed to view this birthing process.

Because they were excluded from academic institutions, female healers of the Middle Ages had little opportunity to contribute to the science of medicine. Rather, they served as herbalists, midwives, surgeons, barber-surgeons, nurses, and the traditional healers. Untutored in medicine, they used therapies based on botanicals, traditional home remedies, purges, bloodletting, and native intelligence.

Medieval hospitals were primarily run by nuns and well-paid laundresses whose job was to wash the vast amounts of dirty linen and dry it outside on the meadow so that it could absorb the herbs.

Wives were expected to take care of the health of the whole family, including servants and to cultivate a garden containing herbs to aid healing. Upon marriage husbands often gave their wives an instruction manual which included every aspect

of healthcare from recipes to make for a good diet to how to deal with fleas in the bed.

In summary women had a vitally important role to play throughout the whole lifecycle from bringing new life into the world, looking after all aspects of healthcare for the whole extended family throughout their lives and finally washing and wrapping the bodies upon death.