

March 2024 Monthly Meeting
Medieval Medicine with Kevin Goodman,
The Time Travelling Medicine Man



After March's talk, we were surprised how many similarities there are between medieval and modern medicine- the questions asked about lifestyle, diet, and exercise; the taking of a pulse and listening to the heart; examining bodily fluids and solids all continue today. We might be confused if our GP today diagnosed us with a choleric/ phlegmatic/ sanguine or melancholic humour, but their prescription would, like medieval physicians', hopefully be attempting to balance the humour and reduce the symptoms.

Medieval ill-health or dis/ease was thought to be caused by poor air conditions or a miasma. That illness could also be caused by bacteria or germs didn't have credence until the 19c, but given our recent pandemic experience, the concept of fresh air and keeping yourselves isolated doesn't seem so strange now!

Using astrological charts, seen as a science in Medieval times, to decide when the best time a treatment would be effective does seem rather farfetched today as does the use of nosegays for fresh smelling air but the holistic use of herbs, tisanes and diet or exercise continue. "Feed a cold, starve a fever" is a phrase often used and Kevin illustrated how if you had a cold you were 'phlegmatic'(i.e. wet and cold) so therefore eating would cause the body to heat up and balance the humour. Similarly, if you have a fever, you would be sanguine (hot and moist) so not eating would cool you down. Other procedures continue to this day- the use of enemas, emetics, and purges, but bleeding by cutting the veins or with leeches or cupping to draw the humour out seem less popular in western medicine.

And of course, if none of these treatments worked you could always make a pilgrimage to a shrine containing holy relics– you could offer a votive of your injury, release a captured image of your damaged part from a mirrored box or bathe it in holy water and if you couldn't make the journey yourself, a pardoner would intercede for you – for a fee!

This was a fascinating and well-illustrated talk, along with examples of medieval medical equipment, which had us all thinking about the changes that have happened, or not, in medicine over 1000 years.

If you missed the talk it is available as a Zoom recording here.

https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/uU6KSb3YnGNMcS9KYA3wJyqTnVX4XBKUf19r4UN-TwB8-4lq4v-s4Tax1qPOZEU.bqh463hgCxXy2_iU

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