



Plants and Prayers

Health and healing before 1700

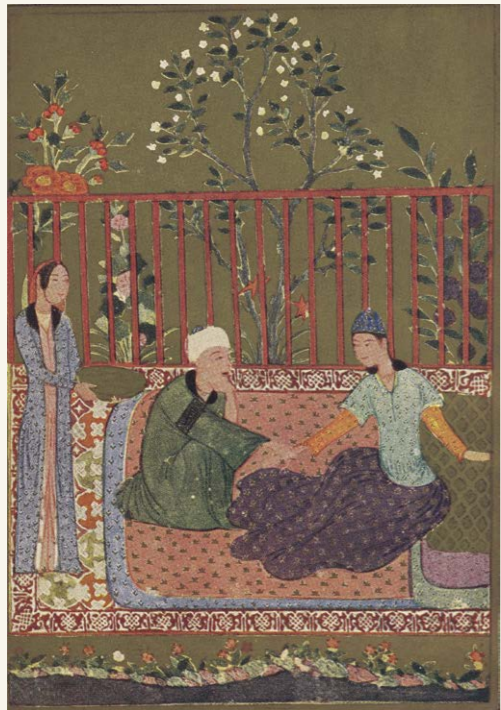


Illustration showing 'A Physician and his patient', from *A treatise on the Canon of medicine of Avicenna: incorporating a translation of the first book* by O Cameron Gruner (1930). Central Store 2 WZ215.A7 GRU

Plants and Prayers: Health and healing before 1700

The long period of the Early Middle Ages to around 1700 saw change and innovation, but there are a number of traditions that unite the practice of medicine across this timespan. The first is that healing was not necessarily always practiced by what we today would call a doctor. Other occupations also offered care; from priests to barbers, patients had options for specialised health care.

Secondly, this is a period in which remedies were not made at an industrial scale or regularised by some authority. However, cures were still tried and tested by early versions of experimentation. Textual evidence suggests that there were trained apothecaries who knew how to combine ingredients into potent remedies. These practitioners had a deep understanding of how to gather, mix, and apply cures.

Visitors may be familiar with some of the most popular images of historical medical cures, such as leeches, bloodletting, or complicated elixirs from the alchemist's workshop. This is only half of the story: pre-modern medicine was based on a patient-focussed system of care, where remedies were adapted according to the characteristics of the recipient. This required near constant hands-on monitoring of the patient by the medical practitioner. It is also a practice founded in the works of classical antiquity, including Hippocrates (ca. 460 – 375 BCE) and Galen (c.129 – 216), and indebted to Arabic and Jewish medicine, such as the works of Ibn-Sīnā, commonly known in the West as Avicenna (c.980 – 1037), and Maimonides (1138 – 1204), who were towering figures in medieval texts. Access to medical thought in the West is profoundly indebted to Constantinus Africanus (c.1020 – c.1087), who was a multilingual medical scholar. He changed the course of medical development through his Latin translations of Arabic medical texts.



Engraving of the Greek physician and philosopher Galen, from *The works of Ambrose Parey: wherein are contained an introduction to chirurgery in general...*(1691). Med Chi Oversize WZ240.P25 PAR



Engraving of bones and musculature of the human body from German anatomist Bernhard Siegfried Albinus's *Tabulae sceleti et musculorum corporis humani* (1749). Some of the illustrated backgrounds, which attracted some contemporary criticism for their artistic style, contain classical symbolism. Med Chi Collection Over.XX QM21 ALB