

History of Medicine

European Medical Books

In early medieval Europe, religious groups established hospitals and infirmaries in monasteries and later developed charitable institutions designed to care for the victims of vast epidemics of bubonic plague, leprosy, smallpox, and other diseases that swept Europe during the Middle Ages. The Benedictines were especially active in this work, collecting and studying ancient medical texts in their library at Monte Cassino near Salerno, Italy. St. Benedict of Nursia, the founder of the order, obligated its members to study the sciences, especially medicine. The abbot of Monte Cassino, Bertharius, was himself a famous physician.

During the 9th and 10th centuries Salerno became Europe's center for medical care and education and was the site of the first Western school of medicine. By the 12th century other medical schools were established at the universities of Bologna and Padua in Italy, the University of Paris in France, and Oxford University in England.

In the 13th century, medical licensure by examination was endorsed and strict measures were instituted for the control of public hygiene. Representative scientists of this period include the German scholastic St. Albertus Magnus, who engaged in biological research, and the English philosopher Roger Bacon, who undertook research in optics and refraction and was the first scholar to suggest that medicine should rely on remedies provided by chemistry. Bacon, often regarded as an original thinker and pioneer in experimental science, was strongly influenced by the authority of Greek and Arabic medicine.

The period of the Renaissance, which began at the end of the 14th century and lasted for about 200 years, was one of the most revolutionary and stimulating in the history of mankind. Invention of printing and gunpowder, discovery of America, the new cosmology of Copernicus, the Reformation, the great voyages of discovery - all these new forces were working to free science and medicine from the shackles of medieval stagnation. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 scattered the Greek scholars, with their precious manuscripts, all over Europe.

The revival of learning in Western civilizations brought great advances in human anatomy. Some resulted from the work of artists, including Italian Leonardo da Vinci, who dissected human corpses to portray muscles and other structures more accurately. Andreas Vesalius, a Belgian anatomist, clearly demonstrated hundreds of anatomical errors introduced by Galen centuries earlier. Gabriel Falliopus discovered the uterine tubes named after him and diagnosed ear diseases with an ear speculum. He described in detail the muscles of the eye, tear ducts, and fallopian tubes. Italian physician Girolamo Fracastoro recognized that infectious diseases are spread by invisible so-called seeds that can reproduce themselves. He founded modern epidemiology, the study of how diseases spread. The term syphilis, applied to the virulent disease then devastating Europe, was derived from his famous poem, "Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus" (Syphilis or Disease of Gauls, 1530). Ambroise Paré introduced new surgical techniques and helped to found modern surgery.