

Was the Renaissance a time of progress in medicine?

Story

Create a title for each paragraph.

The passage below is from Roy Porter, Cambridge illustrated history of medicine.

Summarise each paragraph in 1 or 2 bullet points.

A sound anatomical and psychological basis is essential to scientific medicine, but it could develop only out of systematic dissection. Ecclesiastical opposition to dissection slowly melted away in mediaeval times. During the Black Death in the mid 14th century the papacy sanctioned post mortems to search for the cause of the pestilence but it was not until 1537 that Pope Clement VII finally accepted the teaching of anatomy by dissection. From the 14th century however dissections became common especially in Italy which was then the centre of scientific inquiry. Demonstrations were public occasions, almost spectacles for the purpose not of research but instruction. Dressed in long robes he would sit in a high chair reading out relevant passages from the works of Galen, while his assistant pointed to the organs alluded to and a dissector did the knife work. Early in the sixteenth century Leonardo da Vinci produced 750 anatomical drawings done in a private capacity, in secret and no impact at all on medical progress.

The real breakthrough came with the work of Andreas Vesalius. He studied in Paris, Louvaine and Padua. He later became a court physician to the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and King Philip II of Spain. In 1543 he published his master work 'on the structure of the human body'. In this is exquisitely illustrated text printed in Basel. Vesalius praised observation and challenged Galenic teachings on various points, recognising that Galen's beliefs rested on knowledge of animals rather than humans.

Vesalius' great contribution lay in creating a new atmosphere of inquiry and in setting anatomical study on solid foundations of observed fact. Although his work contained no startling discoveries, it induced a shift in intellectual strategy. After Vesalius, appeals to ancient authority lost their unquestioned validity and his successors were compelled to stress precision and personal and first-hand observation. Vesalius' work was quickly honoured: Ambroise Pare, the leading surgeon of the day used it for the anatomical section of his classic work on surgery published in 1564.

Vesalius presented exact descriptions and illustrations of the skeleton and muscles, the nervous system, the viscera, and the blood vessels. His followers developed his techniques in greater depth and detail.

Source

In 1659 one of Culpepper's students published a biography of his master in which he reported Culpepper's view of the Royal College of Physicians:

Bloodsuckers, true vampires, who have learnt little since Hippocrates, they used bloodletting and purging. They evacuate and revulse their patients until they faint.



Prosthetic leg designed by Ambroise Pare

The Royal Society was founded in 1660 to bring together leading scientific minds of the day, and became an international network for practical and philosophical investigation of the physical world.



Diary of Samuel Pepys:

16 October 1665 But Lord, how empty the streets are, and melancholy, so many poor sick people in the streets, full of sores, and so many sad stories overheard as I walk, everybody talking of this dead, and that man sick, and so many in this place, and so many in that. And they tell me that in Westminster there is never a physician, and but one apothecary left, all being dead – but that there are great hopes of a great decrease this week. God send it.

Scholarship



Roy Porter (2004)

Before the introduction of anaesthetics in the 1840s all invasive surgery depended on the swift hand, sharp knife and cool nerve of the operator so as to minimise pain. Operations that was slow or demanded great precision were beyond the range of early surgeons. A few highly dangerous operations were performed, however in dire emergency. One of the most controversial was Cesarean section which many authorities, Pare included, believed were inevitably fatal. The bulk of the traditional surgeons work remained routine small-scale and fairly safe. It involved everyday therapeutics such as dressing wounds, drawing teeth, dealing with venereal disease, treating skin blemishes and so forth. The most common surgical procedure was bloodletting often performed at the patients request.



Miles Weatherall. *In Search of a Cure: a History of Pharmaceutical Discovery.*

Other introductions to Europe from the Americas included the practice of smoking the dried leaves of the tobacco plant, *Nicotiana*, brought to England by Sir Walter Raleigh in the 16th Century, primarily as a medicine. Adventurers also brought home ipecacuanha from Brazil, where the shrub was known as a powerful medicine. It is effective in some cases of poisoning and is used as a cough mixture.