Introduction to Unit 1: Medicine and treatment c.1350 to the present day

This book will look at developments in medicine from 1350 up to the present day. You will be asked to think about:

- what changed, why it changed and why it changed at that particular time;
- whether the change was an improvement;
- what didn’t change and why it didn’t change.

These pictures show you some of the topics you will study. The leper is an example of someone suffering from an infectious disease in the Middle Ages. We also see how care for the sick has changed over the years: the second picture is of Florence Nightingale treating sick and wounded men during the Crimean War. The third picture shows how science has given us ways to prevent disease and improve people’s health – it is a picture of a vaccine for meningitis C.

Prehistoric
There is no written evidence but we have pictures and skeletons that give us some clues about health and medicine.

Ancient Egypt
We have some written evidence and more paintings and artefacts that give us more clues about health and medicine (such as mummies and lists of herbal remedies).

Ancient Greece
By this time we have a wider range of evidence, including pictures, remains of temple buildings and written records from doctors.

Ancient Rome
Now we have even more evidence, such as medical texts, pictures, and buildings such as public baths and aqueducts.
Key themes as you work through each period will be:
• What did people think caused illness?
• How did they try to treat and prevent illness?
• Who cared for the sick?
• Was there any progress in medicine?
• What factors affected the developments in medicine?

**Activity**

1. Look at these pictures of doctors (labelled A to E) and put them in chronological order – that means from the earliest in time to the latest in time.

A. A female doctor examining a pregnant woman.
B. A doctor inspecting a patient's urine.
C. A plague doctor, wearing a mask.
D. A female doctor taking a patient's pulse.
E. A doctor carrying out bloodletting.

**400 CE to 1500 CE:**
**Middle Ages**
For this period we can look at evidence from medical texts (both handwritten manuscripts and the earliest printed materials) and buildings such as hospitals.

**1500 to 1750:**
**The Medical Renaissance**
This was a period when printed texts became more widely available, so we have a much wider range of evidence.

**1750 to 1900:**
**The industrial period**
For this period we have a wide range of evidence, such as public records, photographs and medical instruments.

**1900 to present:**
**The modern period**
For this period, as well as a wide range of written evidence, buildings and instruments, we can also use oral accounts.
Section 1: Medicine and treatment c.1350–1750

What were your chances of a long life if you were born in 1350?

Learning outcomes
By the end of this topic you should be able to:
- demonstrate why many people’s life expectancy was so low during the Middle Ages

Before …
- The Ancient Greeks had developed an explanation for ill health based on natural causes rather than supernatural ones.
- The Romans introduced good standards of public health throughout their empire.
- When the Romans left Britain in the 5th century, much of their civilisation gradually collapsed as England was then invaded by the Angles, Saxons, Vikings and then Normans.

After …
- In the late 18th and 19th centuries there were significant advances in the understanding of the causes of ill health and a greater use of science and technology in medicine.

Key terms
apothecary a person who made medicines and ointments from a range of ingredients such as herbs and spices
Black Death a highly infectious disease that spread throughout Europe in the mid-14th century
bloodletting the drawing of blood from a patient by a doctor
the Church the international organisation of all Christian believers
Four Humours a theory that developed in Ancient Greece to explain illness
medieval a name for the ‘Middle Ages’, the period between the Ancient World (which ended when the Romans left Britain) and the Renaissance of the 16th and 17th centuries
physician a trained doctor
Reformation a period of challenges to the authority and teachings of the Catholic Church
Renaissance a period in the 16th and 17th centuries when people thought they were reviving Ancient Greek and Ancient Roman culture
Royal Society a group set up in 1660 to enable educated people to discuss scientific ideas
supernatural forces outside normal nature that some people believe can affect events, e.g. God, charms and luck, witchcraft or astrology

FASCINATING FACT
The fur worn by rich people kept them warm but also tended to attract fleas.

Watch out!
Many students assume that life in the Middle Ages was the same for everyone. Remember that there was great variation between different areas of the country and different groups within society.
Life expectancy

Nowadays the average life expectancy is around 80 years. In the 1350s it was around 30 years, although the rich, who didn’t do manual work and had better diets, might have lived longer. Of course, some individuals lived to be 50, 60 and even 80, but this was unusual.

So what were your chances of a long life? Infant mortality was high. Out of every five children born, there was a high chance that one would die before their first birthday and another would die in childhood. They died from illness, injury, poor living conditions or malnutrition. The remaining three might grow up and get married and have their own families. Even so, many women died in childbirth and working men could die from injuries at work, while diseases such as smallpox, leprosy and various fevers – called ‘agues’ – killed people of all ages.

Medicine in the medieval period was focused on dealing with infectious diseases but also on treating daily aches and pains. Conditions that we can now treat successfully, such as heart problems, types of cancer or the need for a hip replacement, were less of a problem because fewer people lived to old age. But when these conditions did develop, there was usually no successful treatment for them.

In 1350, most people lived in small villages. They grew their own food, made their own clothes and bought anything else they needed at the local market or nearest town. They probably had only one room in their home and during the winter they often brought their animals, such as cows and pigs, indoors.

Activities

1. Make a list of the main causes of death in the medieval period described on these pages.
2. What clues can you see in the picture of a peasant’s home to suggest reasons why people might become ill?
3. Summarise the reasons why life expectancy in medieval times was so much shorter than it is nowadays, using the headings: Living Conditions; Disease; Other Reasons.

Challenge

4. How far do you think it is still true that richer people in Britain tend to live longer than poorer people? You should be able to think of points to both support and challenge this idea, so make sure you explain why you find some points are stronger than others.
Section 1: Medicine and treatment c.1350–1750

How far did medical ideas from the Ancient World continue to be used in the Middle Ages?

Learning outcomes
By the end of this topic you should be able to:
• understand the idea of ill health being the result of an imbalance in the Four Humours
• provide examples of treatments based on the Four Humours
• explain the link between ideas and treatments and provide examples

The Four Humours
The Ancient Greeks identified four different liquids, or humours, in the body:
• blood;
• phlegm (the watery liquid when you sneeze or cough);
• yellow bile (when you are sick);
• black bile (blood in your vomit, which makes the liquid look black).

The Greeks thought that every person had their own individual mix of these Four Humours and that, if this mix was unbalanced, you became ill. So, if you had a temperature, your skin went red and hot because you had too much blood, whereas a dark lump was the result of too much black bile.

They also thought that these humours were linked to the four seasons and their idea of four elements (earth, air, fire and water). Therefore, in winter, which is linked to water, they believed that your body produces too much phlegm and you have to sneeze and cough to get rid of it.

This theory helped to explain why people became ill and sometimes treatment tried to restore the balance of the Four Humours, for example, by letting out excess blood. However, Hippocrates, the leading Greek doctor, suggested that most treatment should be based on rest, changes in diet and leaving the body to heal itself.

Galen and the Theory of Opposites
Later, Galen, a doctor working in Rome in the second century CE, developed the Theory of the Four Humours further. He believed very strongly in bloodletting as a treatment for almost all illnesses and also suggested that the balance of a person’s Four Humours could be restored by his Theory of Opposites. He suggested that, if you had too much phlegm, which is linked to water and cold, you should eat hot peppers; if you had a temperature, you should eat cucumber, which would cool you down.

Galen produced over 350 texts about medicine and surgery which summarised medical knowledge at the time. He explained his new ideas and linked them with existing theories, making them into one coherent system. He was very confident and
boldly claimed that he had now perfected Ancient Greek ideas, so many people believed that there was no point in any further medical research.

**Galen in the Middle Ages**

Galen’s ideas continued to be the basis of medical training throughout the Middle Ages. When the first European medical school was established at Salerno in the 10th century, teaching was based on his ideas and texts rather than students having any practical experience. Treatment was also usually based on Galen’s ideas of bloodletting, purging and his Theory of Opposites. However, physicians also prescribed medicines based on a wide range of ingredients, such as plants, herbs and spices, and also ground minerals or the bezoar (a stone found in the stomach of goats in Persia).

As learning increased during the 12th century, there was a great deal of interest in the stars and in astrology. Scholars linked these star signs to the Greek idea of four elements of earth, air, fire and water. These astrological ideas were then linked to Galen’s ideas on medicine. For example, doctors believed that an operation on the head should be avoided when the moon is in the sign of Aries.

**FASCINATING FACT**

Some treatments of this period would have worked: for example, honey has natural antiseptic properties, so smearing it on to a sore or wound would have been effective. But hanging a magpie’s beak around your neck would probably not have cured your toothache!

**Activities**

1. Draw a mind map or picture summary to show the importance of Galen’s work in the Roman period.
2. How far was medicine in the medieval period still based on Galen’s ideas?
3. ‘The continued use of Galen’s idea 1,000 years after his death shows a lack of progress in medicine.’ How far do you agree with this statement?
4. Prepare a series of True/False statements about medicine in the Ancient World and Middle Ages that can be done as a revision quiz or as a starter activity for the next few lessons.

**Summary**

- Galen’s ideas and the Theory of the Four Humours from Roman times continued to be very important in the Middle Ages.
Section 1: Medicine and treatment c.1350–1750

Medical ideas and practices at the time of the Black Death

Learning outcomes
By the end of this topic you should be able to:
• understand why people turned to religion as an explanation for the Black Death
• explain why people became flagellants
• understand why people continued to use remedies that did not work

The Black Death
People in medieval times lived in small villages and did not travel far, so diseases didn’t usually spread over the whole country. However, in 1348 a disease reached England that had already killed thousands of people in Europe. About one third of the population died in an outbreak of bubonic plague that became known as the Black Death.

Why were religion and medicine so closely linked?
In Europe in the Middle Ages there were some Jews and Muslims, but most people were Christians and followed the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Religion was a very important part of people’s lives because it provided explanations for so much that happened – bad harvests, the death of an animal, or someone suddenly becoming ill. Religion told them that these things occurred because God was displeased with them, or because God was testing them to see if they stayed faithful even when bad things happened.

The idea that the plague was a punishment or a test from God meant that some people’s reaction to the illness was to walk in procession to the church, whipping themselves, to show God how sorry they were and to ask for his mercy. These people became known as ‘flagellants’.

Fascinating Fact
The bubonic plague was carried by the fleas that lived on black rats. As the body tried to fight the illness, the lymph glands swelled into ‘buboes’.

This picture shows the understanding that Death could take anyone, at any time.

Why did people whip themselves because of the plague?
Other ideas about the plague
Other ideas about the cause of the plague included:

- an unusual positioning of the planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn (events among the stars and planets were thought to affect events on earth);
- poisonous fumes from volcanoes and earthquakes;
- human contact;
- bad air (miasma) from decaying refuse, spread through movements in the air;
- an imbalance in the Four Humours;
- the activities of groups of outsiders, such as strangers or witches (in Europe they also blamed Jews; the Jews had been forced to leave England the century before this).

Treatments
Because people in medieval times did not know the true causes of the plague, their treatments and remedies were unlikely to be successful, but some people made a lot of money selling fake potions and remedies! Some of the actions they tried were:

- holding a piece of bread against the buboes and then burying it in the ground;
- fasting and praying;
- eating cool things;
- carrying herbs and spices to smell;
- walking in procession to a church, saying prayers and whipping each other;
- cutting open the buboes and draining the pus;
- tidying the rubbish from the streets;
- lighting a fire in the room;
- keeping the air moving by ringing bells or keeping birds flying around the room;
- not letting people enter the town or village from other places.

Other reactions to the plague were to move away from the area or to decide that you would eat, drink, and enjoy whatever life you had left.

Activities
1. Explain why, in 1348, someone who caught the plague might go to a priest rather than to a doctor.
2. Why did the plague spread more rapidly in towns than in the countryside?
3. Classify people’s ideas about the cause of the plague into:
   a) theories based on belief in the supernatural, such as religion, astrology or witchcraft;
   b) ideas based on natural causes, such as unbalanced humours or poisonous gases.
4. Divide the list of treatments into:
   a) those aimed at curing the plague;
   b) those aimed at preventing the plague.
5. Look at the lists in your answer to question 4; explain which actions you think might have been effective and why.

Challenge
6. Why did people continue to follow the advice of priests and doctors even when so many priests and doctors themselves caught the plague and died?

Roleplay
A village meeting. One of your villagers has come back from another village with news of many people falling ill and dying. What does he tell the people in the village? What is the response of the villagers? Include ideas from the village priest and a doctor.

Go further
Find out about the pneumonic and septicaemic plagues – their causes, symptoms and death rates.

Summary
- There was a range of ideas about causes of the Black Death. Since these were inaccurate, ideas about its treatment and prevention usually had no effect at all.
Section 1: Medicine and treatment c.1350–1750

Who was responsible for treating the sick in the Middle Ages?

Learning outcomes

By the end of this topic you should be able to:

• compare the range of treatments available during the Middle Ages

Top tips!

Students often state that people in the Middle Ages were stupid because they used supernatural ideas in their medicine.

The best answers recognise that people might try different types of remedies at the same time.

Galen’s ideas and medical teaching

The first medical schools were set up at universities during the 12th century and books included knowledge from both Muslim and Christian doctors. Some of Galen’s works, which had been lost in western Europe, now became better known and most physicians’ training was based on his ideas. Even though a few human dissections were carried out, it was to demonstrate Galen’s teaching while his book was read out loud by the lecturer. Nobody was expected to check whether Galen was right or not.

Galen had lived before Christianity became a major religion, but his ideas fitted well with Christian beliefs. For example, he wrote that the body was created by a God with all the parts working together in harmony, and he believed in a soul. This was important in the Middle Ages, as the majority of education and medical training was controlled by the Church and most collections of books were in monasteries. Because the Church approved of Galen’s teachings it was very difficult for anyone to challenge his ideas, even if the thought had occurred to them.

Who will you go to?

This poor person is feeling very ill. What choices does she have for treatment?

The trained physician

• has had training – medical school and passed exams;
• knows all about Galen;
• will diagnose you using your urine and astrological information;
• often bases treatment on Galen: likely to be bloodletting, purging to balance your humours or herbal medicine;
• consults astrology to determine best approach to treatment;
• can be expensive – you pay for each visit, but he knows he is worth it, as he is superior to all others, especially apothecaries and barber-surgeons;
• doesn’t mix medicines – you get them from the apothecary;
• might not let blood himself – will direct you to barber-surgeon;
• will be male – women physicians incredibly rare in this period.

The apothecary

• is trained but has no medical qualifications;
• mixes various ingredients to produce medicines or ointments for the physician;
• may also make you up their own mixture for a price;
• is cheaper than having to consult a physician and then pay apothecary for same medicine anyway;
• is probably male.

FASCINATING FACT

The ointment used to treat syphilis, a sexual disease that developed in Europe during the 15th century, contained mercury. This had the side effect of turning your saliva black.
Treatments

Treatment continued to be a mixture of tried and tested herbal remedies, bleeding and purging, and supernatural ideas. Trained physicians based their diagnosis and treatment on the Four Humours, often using astrology to decide when to bleed a patient. Healers and patients also showed a belief in the supernatural, so cures might include saying a prayer or holding a lucky charm while the physician was bleeding a patient to balance their humours. Superstitious cures might include ingredients such as powdered unicorn horn, saying a charm as you drank a medicine or using plants that had to be picked at full moon.

Activities

1. Imagine you are a newly qualified physician who wants to set up business in your local town. Produce an advertisement explaining how knowledgeable you are and what services you offer.

2. Explain why the housewife-physician was less respected than the physician, even though she treated more people.

3. Draw a diagram to explain how religion was linked to medicine; use the headings: Ideas about the Causes of Ill Health; Treatment and Prevention of Ill Health; Care for the Sick; Medical Training.

4. Why did people continue to use remedies that didn’t work?

5. Use the information on this page to create a series of ‘Top Trumps’ cards for each of the different people who cared for the sick. Give each person a rating out of five for (a) their knowledge; (b) experience; (c) the cost of their treatment; and (d) likely success rate.

Summary

- There were many different choices of health treatment for the rich, but very few for the poor.
The impact of the Medical Renaissance (c.1500–c.1750)

Learning outcomes
By the end of this topic you should be able to:
• describe what Harvey achieved
• explain the effects of Harvey’s work on medical knowledge
• understand why Harvey’s work had limited impact on treatment

Renaissance and Reformation
Historians give labels to periods in history. The word Renaissance is ‘shorthand’ for a period in European history when Ancient Greek and Roman ideas became fashionable, but it is difficult to say exactly when it began or ended. However, these changes would have had very little effect on ordinary people’s lives.

At the same time, European exploration in Africa and the Americas led to new attitudes and a search for knowledge. Meanwhile, new translations of the Bible were printed, leading to changes in religion. This development, known as the Reformation, led to a decline in the Catholic Church’s authority, even though many people remained very strongly religious.

Vesalius and new ideas about the body
In 1543, Andreas Vesalius, the Professor of Surgery at Padua University in Italy, published an important book called The Fabric of the Human Body. This included drawings showing the muscles, nerves, organs and skeleton of the human body based on dissections of corpses.

Vesalius’ book had two major impacts. First, even if physicians did not do dissections themselves, they could still learn a great deal about human anatomy from his illustrations. Second, Vesalius discovered that some of Galen’s teachings were wrong.

Some examples of Vesalius’ corrections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Galen</th>
<th>Vesalius</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The septum, which divides the left and right sides of the heart, has holes in it to allow blood to cross from one side to the other.</td>
<td>The septum is very thick and has no holes, so blood cannot pass through it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The liver has five parts or lobes.</td>
<td>The liver does not have any lobes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lower jaw is made up of two bones.</td>
<td>The lower jaw in humans is a single bone, although the lower jaw of monkeys and pigs is made up of two bones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sternum has seven parts.</td>
<td>The sternum has three parts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why was printing important in spreading new ideas?
The invention of the printing press in Germany in the mid-15th century meant that new ideas could now spread more easily because printed copies of works could be produced quickly and cheaply. As well as some challenges to existing ideas, books such as Nicholas Culpeper’s Complete Herbal in 1653 contained descriptions of various herbs and plants that continued to be used in medicine.

Harvey and even newer ideas about the body
William Harvey, an Englishman, proved even more of Galen’s ideas to be incorrect:
• Veins only carried blood, rather than a mixture of blood and air.
• Blood was not constantly manufactured by the liver and was not used up as it moved around the body (as Galen taught), but is actually circulated repeatedly around the body.
Harvey published a book in 1628 called *An Anatomical Account of the Motion of the Heart and Blood in Animals*, explaining how the heart worked as a pump circulating blood around the body. He also suggested that the blood must go through tiny blood vessels in order to move from arteries to veins – he was right, but microscopes were not powerful enough to prove that these capillaries existed until much later.

Harvey’s book explained the experiments he had done to test his ideas, for example showing that blood could be pushed along veins towards the heart but could not be pushed backwards through the veins.

**The impact of Renaissance discoveries**

There were a number of technological developments, such as mechanisms in pumps and clocks, that helped people to accept the idea of the body functioning as a machine. The Dutch scientist, Leeuwenhoek, developed better lenses for a microscope. He discovered bacteria, which he called ‘animalcules’ and he wrote about these in a letter to the *Royal Society* in 1673.

Nevertheless, it took over 40 years before Harvey’s ideas were accepted by other doctors and taught at medical schools. This was because people are often reluctant to accept new ideas if it means accepting that their ‘knowledge’ is actually wrong. Since doctors’ training was still based on Galen’s ideas and physicians did not carry out dissections, their attitudes were very slow to change. Furthermore, Harvey’s work was on physiology (how the body’s organs function), rather than on the cause or treatment of illness, and so his work did not seem particularly relevant to the work of physicians and the problems of disease.

Consequently, treatments of disease continued to be based on the Four Humours. There seemed to be very little change between 1348 and a plague epidemic in London in 1665. People also continued to believe that a king could cure the form of tuberculosis (TB) known as scrofula. It is said that Charles II (1660 – 85) touched over 8,000 victims in one year.
Renaissance developments

There were significant changes in people’s knowledge and understanding of the human body during the Renaissance period, but very few of these changes led to improvement in the understanding and treatment of illness. Here are some events and factors affecting the development of medicine during this period:

- The invention of the microscope
- The invention of the mechanical pump
- The Catholic Church forbade dissection
- Some herbal remedies worked
- The works of Galen were used as the basis for all medical training
- The invention of the printing press
- The Catholic Church controlled education and medical training
- The foundation of universities and medical schools in the 12th century
- Herbal remedies were passed down from one generation to the next

Learning outcomes

By the end of this topic you should be able to:
- understand that there were elements of change and continuity in medicine simultaneously throughout this period
- analyse the role of various factors in developments during this period.
### Activities

1. Draw a timeline from 1350 to 1750 and mark on it all the key events and significant individuals you have studied so far.

2. Study the list of events and factors affecting developments in medicine on these pages. Classify them into two groups:
   a) points leading to progress;
   b) points holding back developments so that old ideas continued.

3. Do you think that the period from 1350 to 1750 was a period in medicine of mainly change or mainly continuity?

4. Would your answer to question 3 have been different if the question was about the time period 1350–1500 or 1500–1700?

5. Go back to the two lists you produced in your answer to question 2; colour code your list to show:
   - the role of religion;
   - scientific knowledge;
   - technological equipment;
   - social attitudes.

6. Which factor do you think has been most important in leading to change?

7. Which factor do you think has been most important in maintaining continuity?

8. Draw a Venn diagram, showing aspects of medieval medicine, Renaissance medicine and aspects that appear in both periods.

### ResultsPlus

**Build Better Answers**

**Question:** Why did the discoveries of the Renaissance have such limited impact on the understanding and treatment of illness?

- **Basic, Level 1 answers**
  These are answered in very general terms and do not provide any examples of Renaissance discoveries.

- **Good, Level 2-3 answers**
  These would give good descriptions of the Renaissance discoveries of Vesalius, Harvey and the printing press, but often students lose marks by not linking these directly to the question.

- **Excellent, Level 4 answers**
  These answers did more than describe the Renaissance discoveries, they explained why the work of Vesalius and Harvey and the invention of the printing press improved knowledge of anatomy and physiology, but did not improve understanding of disease.
Source enquiry: how much evidence do we have about the role of women in medieval medicine?

Learning outcomes
By the end of this topic you should be able to:
- explore the role of women in medicine
- examine the problems historians face when researching a subject where evidence is limited

Reseaching the role of women
The role of women in medieval medicine is a difficult topic to research because our evidence is so limited. Most people in the period 1350–1750 could not read and write and, although boys might receive an education to become lawyers or merchants, the education for girls (even in wealthy families) was based around running a home. This means that we have very few sources produced by women to tell us about their lives in the medieval period.

Furthermore, the accounts written by men tended to focus on events such as new laws, wars and the actions of the rich. They did not feel that accounts of daily life were important and, therefore, we have only a limited amount of sources to tell us about family life and women’s activities.

Background
The legal records of a court case in Paris in 1322 show how the city’s university accused a woman called Jacoba of working without the proper qualifications. A number of people gave evidence that her treatments had been successful and it was suggested that the only reason Jacoba was prosecuted was because she was so successful that male doctors were losing business.

Sometimes we can gather together information from different sources and try to build up a picture of women during the medieval period, but we do not know whether the women in these sources are examples of typical behaviour or unusual cases.

What do these pictures suggest about the role of women in medieval medicine?
Section 1: Medicine and treatment c.1350–1750

**Background**
The Paston family wrote many letters to each other in the 14th century that include comments about daily illnesses and injuries. Here is an extract from a letter from Margaret Paston (treacle or syrup was expected to remove infections):

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I ask you heartily that you will quickly send me a pot of treacle for I have used that which I had. One of the tallest young men in this parish lies sick and has a great fever. I have sent my Uncle Berney the pot of treacle that you bought for him.
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**Background**
Lady Grace Mildmay was from a wealthy English family in the 16th century and there are a number of recipes for herbal medicines listed in her papers. Here she is writing about headaches:

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If it arises from phlegm, the face will be full and pale, and the eyes swollen and dark.
For remedy of the headache, of what kind soever it be, according to the signs of the offending humour, apply cordials or coolers inward and outward. If giddiness or other grief in the head have been occasioned by keeping corrupt fluids within the body, then must opening things be given.
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**Background**
In a book he wrote in 1651, Dr James Primrose complained about women going beyond their proper responsibilities and doing the work of a physician:

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They know how to make a bed well, boyle pottage, and they know many remedies for diseases. But (dealing with ulcers and wounds) cannot but be known by a skilful physician and women ought not to meddle with them. They take their remedies out of English books but Galen teaches that remedies should be altered according to the person, place, part affected and other circumstances and seeing that these things cannot be attained without much labour and study, I cannot be brought to believe they are able to understand, or perform what they promise.
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Here is an extract from a letter from John Paston to his wife Margery:

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Send as quickly as possible a large plaster (poultice) for the king’s attorney for an ache in his knees. When you send me the plaster you must write to me telling me how long it should stay on the knee. And whether he must wrap any cloth around the plaster to keep it warm.
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**Activities**

1. How much weight do you think the historian should put on individual examples, such as the three women (Jacoba, Margaret Paston and Lady Grace Mildmay) named in the examples above?
2. How much weight should the historian put on the complaints of Dr Primrose?
3. Is it reasonable for historians to generalise about the situation of women when we have only a few pieces of surviving evidence spread over a long period of time? Explain your answer.
4. How do you think the historian can deal with the problems caused by the lack of sources about medieval women?