Medicine and treatment

Introduction

This unit will look at developments in medicine from Roman Britain up to the present day. It is separated into the following sections:

• Medicine and treatment c1350–c1750
• Medicine and treatment c1750–c1900
• Medicine and treatment c1900 to present day
• Medicine and public health from Roman Britain c1350
• Public health from c1350 to present day.

You will be asked to think about what changed, why and why at that particular time; whether the change was an improvement; what didn’t change and why it didn’t.

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 – nothing could be done to cure leprosy at the time. 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.
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 D) and put them in chronological order—that means from the earliest in time to the latest.

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

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.

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

The Industrial revolution
For this period, as well as a wide range of written evidence, buildings and instruments, we can also use oral accounts and film.

Answer to Activity: the correct order is B, D, C, A.
1.1 Medicine and treatment

c1350–c1750: introduction

This section begins with examining medicine and treatment in 1350 before moving on to discover what changed and what remained the same in the period up to 1750. The key words on this page are important throughout this section so you may need to refer back to this page until you understand what they mean!

Before...

- The Ancient Greeks 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...

- Not until the late 18th and 19th centuries were there significant advances in the understanding of the causes of ill health and a greater use of science and technology in medicine.

Apothecary: A person who made medicines and ointments using 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 and divisions within the Christian Church

Renaissance: A period in the 16th and 17th centuries when people thought they were reviving Ancient Greek and Ancient Roman culture but also made new discoveries

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, for example, God, charms and luck, witchcraft or astrology
Learning outcome
By the end of this topic you should be able to:
• understand why many people’s life expectancy was so low during the Middle Ages

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 children might grow up and get married and have their own families. Even so, many women died in childbirth and both men and women could die from injuries, 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.

Activities
1. What clues can you see in the above picture of a peasant’s home to suggest reasons why people might become ill?
2. Summarise the reasons why life expectancy in medieval times was so much shorter than it is nowadays, using the following headings: Living conditions; Disease; Other reasons.
3. Explain which of these reasons for a short life expectancy would apply to everyone, and which reasons would apply mainly to the poor.
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, and make sure you explain why you find some points are stronger than others.

Summary
Average life expectancy was around 30 years due to illness, injury, poor living conditions and malnutrition.
Medicine and treatment

1.3 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 that medicine from 1350 to 1750 was still based on ideas from the Ancient World
- 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 (we think this was probably 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 (see the diagram on this page). 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humour</th>
<th>Season</th>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Qualities</th>
<th>Ancient name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blood</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Air</td>
<td>Warm &amp; moist</td>
<td>Sanguine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow bile</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Warm &amp; dry</td>
<td>Choleric</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black bile</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Cold &amp; dry</td>
<td>Melancholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phlegm</td>
<td>Winter</td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Cold &amp; moist</td>
<td>Phlegmatic</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Galen and the Theory of Opposites**

Later, Galen, a doctor working in Rome in the 2nd 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, and therefore 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 the four elements: 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.

Physicians often used a handbook, called ‘vade mecum’, which is Latin for ‘Go with me’. These manuals would include urine charts where the physician could compare the colour of the patient’s urine with the chart to help him diagnose the illness, or a zodiac chart helping the physician to know when to avoid certain treatments. There were also books such as the Compendium of Medicine written by Gilbertus Anglicus (Gilbert the Englishman). This was in Latin because it was intended for educated physicians and helped the physician to diagnose and treat a range of illnesses. Herbals, which described plants and their uses in medicine, were in English because they were used by ordinary people in folk remedies.

Activities

1. Draw an ideas map 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 1000 years after his death shows a lack of progress in medicine.’ How far do you agree with this statement?

Summary

Galen’s ideas and the Theory of the Four Humours from Roman times continued to be very important in the Middle Ages.
1.4 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 the range of ideas about causes of the Black Death and the various approaches to its treatment
- 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 epidemics of 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**.

The bubonic plague was carried by the fleas that lived on black rats; if a flea bit a human, the disease entered the human’s bloodstream. As the body tried to fight the illness, the lymph glands swelled into ‘buboes’. Of those people who caught the bubonic plague, two out of every three died.

**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 groups called ‘flagellants’ walked in procession to the church, whipping themselves, to show God how sorry they were and to ask for his mercy.

**Source A:** This Danse Macabre picture shows the understanding that Death could take anyone, at any time.

**Source B:** 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
- 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, but the Jews had been forced to leave England the century before this).

Treatments

Some of the actions people 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 or leaving the area themselves.

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!

Others decided to eat, drink and enjoy whatever life they had left.

Fascinating Fact

The idea that a strong smell could overcome the plague led some people to smell the contents of their toilets every morning.
1.5 Who was responsible for treating the sick in the Middle Ages?

Learning outcome
By the end of this topic you should be able to:
• understand the range of treatments available during the Middle Ages

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!

Galen’s ideas and medical teaching
Medical schools were set up at universities during the 12th century, and books such as those by the English doctor John of Gaddesden (c1280–1361) included knowledge from both Muslim and Christian doctors. However, most physicians’ training was based on Galen’s ideas. Even though a few human dissections were carried out, they were 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 he believed in a soul and he said that the parts of the body had been created to work together. These ideas fitted well with Christian beliefs and meant that the Church approved of his teachings. Since the majority of education and medical training was controlled by the Church and most collections of books were in monasteries, it was very difficult to challenge Galen’s ideas.

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 at medical school and passed exams
• will diagnose you using your urine and astrological information
• administers treatment based on Galen: likely to be bloodletting, purging to balance your humours or herbal medicine
• consults astrology to determine the best approach to treatment
• can be expensive – you pay for each visit, but he has medical knowledge and believes his treatment to be superior to that of apothecaries and barber-surgeons
• doesn’t mix medicines – you get them from the apothecary
• might not let blood himself – will direct you to the barber-surgeon
• will be male – women physicians were 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 an apothecary for the same medicine anyway
• is probably male.

Watch out!
Students sometimes assume that people in the Middle Ages were stupid because they used supernatural ideas in their medicine.
Students often do not understand that people might try different types of remedies at the same time.
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 patient was bled 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.

The barber-surgeon
- practises lots of bloodletting; can also pull out rotten teeth and lance boils
- can even have a go at some basic surgery, such as cutting out bladder stones or amputating limbs
- uses no anaesthetics, and has a very low success rate for surgery
- is not trained and is not respected by trained physicians
- can also cut your hair.

Hospital
- was nothing like a modern hospital; was usually for the old or for specific illnesses, such as leprosy – sick people were looked after at home
- was run by monks and nuns: Christianity values caring for others
- after the Reformation in the 16th century some free hospitals were set up in towns, funded by charity.

Housewife-physician
- knew traditional remedies for things such as sore throats, stomach aches or a temperature
- would also be able to deal with broken bones and with childbirth – may have had a reputation as a local ‘wise woman’
- used some remedies based on herbs and other plants, and others based on charms and spells
- could be the lady of the manor, who would treat her servants or families living on manor land.

Prayer and pilgrimage
- Many people would also go on pilgrimage to a holy shrine in the hope that they could be cured of an illness.

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 an ideas map to explain how religion was linked to medicine at this time. 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) their 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.

Women and medicine

There were a few female physicians, such as Trotula, who taught at Salerno medical school in the early 12th century. However, women were not allowed to attend universities, which drove them out of the medical profession by the 14th century. Women continued to work as midwives, but they were expected to have a licence from their bishop to show that they were of good character and would not encourage illegal abortions.
1.6 The impact of the Medical Renaissance (c1500–c1750)

Learning outcomes
By the end of this topic you should be able to:
- understand how far existing ideas were challenged by new discoveries
- understand the influence of Vesalius
- understand why Harvey’s work had limited impact on medical treatment

Renaissance and Reformation
- Renaissance is ‘shorthand’ for a period in European history when Ancient Greek and Roman ideas became fashionable, among the rich and educated.
- European exploration in Africa and the Americas led to new attitudes and a search for knowledge. Meanwhile changes in religion known as the Reformation, led to a decline in the Church’s authority, even though most people remained very strongly religious.
- In Britain the Royal Society was set up in 1660 by educated people who wished to discuss new ideas.

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
- Galen had said that the heart was divided by a septum that had holes in it to allow the blood to pass through, but Vesalius showed the septum did not have holes in it.
- Galen had said the liver had five parts or lobes, but Vesalius showed the liver did not have any lobes.
- Galen had said the lower jaw was made up of two bones but Vesalius showed that, although this was true in monkeys and pigs, in humans it was a single bone.
- Galen said the sternum had seven parts but Vesalius showed it only had three.

Source A: An illustration from Vesalius’ book showing the muscles of the human body.

Why was printing important?
The invention of the printing press in Germany in the mid-15th century meant that printed copies of works such as those by Vesalius and which described plants and herbs used in medicine could be produced quickly and cheaply.

Harvey’s discoveries
William Harvey, an Englishman, proved even more of Galen’s ideas to be incorrect. He worked out through experiment and observation that:
- Veins only carry blood, rather than a mixture of blood and air.
- Blood is not constantly manufactured by the liver and is not used up as it moves around the body (as Galen had 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*, describing his experiments and explaining how the heart works 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.

**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. When the Dutch scientist Antonie van Leeuwenhoek developed better lenses for a microscope, he discovered bacteria, which he described as ‘animalcules’, 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 is because people are often reluctant to accept new ideas if it means accepting that their ‘knowledge’ is actually wrong, especially as doctors’ training was still based on Galen’s ideas and physicians did not carry out dissections. 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.

**Source B:** An illustration from Harvey’s book, showing an experiment that proved blood flowed only in one direction in the veins, towards the heart.

**FASCINATING FACT**

Harvey carried out post-mortems on his father and his sister.

**Activities**

1. How did Vesalius’ work affect medical training?
2. Explain why the invention of the printing press at this time was so important for the work of Vesalius and Harvey.
3. Produce a newspaper front page reporting on Harvey’s ideas. Make sure you include quotes by other doctors.

**Challenge**

4. Prepare a series of true/false statements about medicine in the medieval and Renaissance periods that can be done as a revision quiz or as a starter activity for the next few lessons.

**Summary**

The Medical Renaissance saw many old ideas about anatomy and physiology challenged, and the printing press spread these ideas faster and more cheaply than before. But there was resistance to change, and there were not many new developments in the understanding of disease itself.
Renaissance developments

There were significant changes in people’s knowledge and understanding of the human body during the Renaissance period, but very little improvement in the understanding and treatment of illness. When there was a plague epidemic in London in 1665, the treatments used were similar to those used in 1348. Ordinary medical treatment continued to be based on the Four Humours. People also believed that a king’s touch could cure them of tuberculosis (TB). Charles II (1630–1685) touched over 8,000 sufferers of the disease in one year. Here are some events and factors affecting the development of medicine during this period:

1. The Church controlled education and medical training.
2. The Church discouraged dissection.
3. Some herbal remedies worked.
4. New plants were discovered when new lands were explored.
5. The works of Galen were used as the basis for all medical training.
6. The authority of the Catholic Church decreased.
7. Herbal remedies were passed down from one generation to the next.
8. Universities and medical schools were founded in the 12th century.
9. Many people were reluctant to change the way they did things.
10. Many people believed that their lives were affected by supernatural events.
11. The mechanical pump was invented.
12. Some people felt better after being bled or purged.
13. Few people could afford to go to a trained physician.
14. Most minor illnesses and injuries were treated by the women in the family.

Source A: A physician telling an apothecary which ingredients to include in a medicine.
1. Study the list of events and factors affecting developments in medicine on the opposite page. Classify them into two groups:
   a) points leading to progress
   b) points holding back developments so that old ideas continued.

2. Do you think that the period from 1350 to 1750 was a period in medicine of mainly change or mainly continuity (continuing old methods)? Explain your answer.

3. How would your answer to question 2 have been different if the question was about the time period 1350–1500 or 1500–1700? Explain your answer.

4. Go back to the two lists you made in your answer to question 1. Colour code your list to show:
   • the role of religion and beliefs
   • scientific knowledge
   • technological equipment
   • social attitudes.

5. Which of these four factors do you think has been most important in leading to change?

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

7. Draw a Venn diagram like the one below, showing aspects of medieval medicine, Renaissance medicine and aspects that appear in both periods.

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Summary

There were some important changes in knowledge of the body during this period but there was also a great deal of continuity, especially in the ideas about illness and the medical treatments that were used.
1.8 The work of the historian: how much evidence do we have about the role of women in the period 1350–1750?

Learning outcomes
By the end of this topic you should be able to:
- understand the role of women in medicine in the period 1350–1750
- understand the problems historians face when researching a subject where evidence is limited

Researching 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 we therefore have only a limited amount of sources to tell us about family life and women’s activities.

Source A: What do these pictures suggest about the role of women in medieval medicine?

Many women made their own herbal remedies.

Women were usually responsible for the health of the family.

A midwife and female attendant helping a woman through childbirth.
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.

**Source B:** The legal records of a court case in Paris in 1322.

Jacoba visited the sick folk, examining their urine, touching, feeling and holding their pulses, body and limbs. After this examination she would say to the sick folk ‘I will cure you by God’s will, if you will trust in me’, making a compact with them and receiving money from them.

This legal record describes 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.

**Source C:** The Paston family wrote many letters to each other in the 14th century and these 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.)

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.

**Source D:** 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.

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.

**Source E:** 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.

They know how to make a bed well, boyle pottage, and they know many remedies for diseases. But [dealing with ulcers and wounds] can only 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 women are able to understand, or perform what they promise.

**Source F:** Here is an extract from a letter from John Paston to his wife, Margery.

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.

**Activities**

1. **How much can the historian generalise about the role of women in medicine in the period c1350–c1750 from individual examples (such as the three women – Jacoba, Margaret Paston and Lady Grace Mildmay – named in the sources in this section).**

2. **How much weight should the historian put on the complaints of Dr Primrose in Source E?**

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?**