

Long before the advent of clinical pharmacy, or indeed modern healthcare, folk medicine was linked to superstition and a belief in supernatural forces

Fairies, witchcraft and healing charms: how folk medicine and the supernatural entwined

The study of folk medicine has a long history that reflects on the wider development of

healthcare in European society. Over the past 500 years and more, medicine has been defined largely by who has practised it, rather than its theoretical basis or efficacy. It can be argued that much of what is known about the history of “unofficial” medicine derives from prosecutions under laws designed to restrict provision and from attempts by the European medical establishment to assert a monopoly on healthcare.

Bear in mind that we know with hindsight that the treatments provided by professional medicine were, until the last century, often little better than those offered by many unlicensed healers. In the nineteenth century, the rise of the folklore movement tempered the educated condemnation with a more detached curiosity in the perceived “relics” of the medical “ignorance” of the past.

Until the 1980s historians were largely preoccupied with charting the “progress” of biomedicine and institutional healthcare, and rarely gave much thought to the nature and continuance of other healing traditions. But now, just as some of the last links with this alternative history of medical experience are disappearing, a range of relatively new disciplines, namely medical anthropology, ethnobotany, phytotherapy and ethnopharmacology, have provided an impetus for looking again at the

nature and value of Europe’s old medical traditions.

Supernatural forces

For much of recorded history, folk medicine shared theories and practices with the “official” medicine of the medieval clergy and licensed physicians.

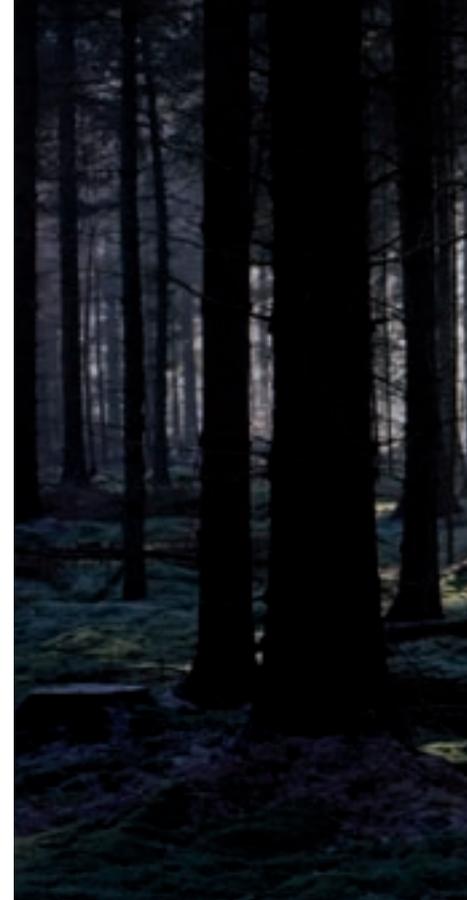
In terms of the aetiologies of folk illness, however, there was, perhaps, a greater emphasis on the influence of supernatural forces. This certainly became one of the clearest differences between the two traditions by the eighteenth century, when across much of Europe the intellectual rationale for the existence of witchcraft was undermined.

As is evident from trial records from the late fifteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, and folklore sources and court cases in the modern era, the diagnosis and cure of witchcraft were an important element of the popular understanding and experience of medicine. Witches were blamed for a wide range of illnesses and accidents, from causing people to break their legs to infesting them with fleas. Conditions, such as cancer, tuberculosis, malaria and epilepsy, which either developed slowly or were recurrent and did not have obvious external symptoms, were particularly likely to attract suspicion of witchcraft.

Across Europe illness and disability were also blamed on various types of supernatural being.



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In Ireland, for instance, fairies remained a significant element of popular aetiology right into the nineteenth century. Here, as well as in Scotland, Wales and elsewhere, sickly wizened babies exhibiting such features as wrinkled skin, stunted growth and oversized heads, which can be identified with various congenital disorders, were thought by some to be fairy children — substitutes for human infants abducted by the fairies. Similar beliefs were held in Norway where the deformities caused by childhood rickets were commonly blamed on the *huldrefolk* (hidden people).

Numerous other folk aetiologies were based on incorrect but nevertheless reasonable observation and deduction about natural associations. These often still required a magical remedy. For example, in Sicily in the 1980s, there still existed a healing tradition based on the notion that a fright or shock could agitate intestinal worms out of their usual “normal” position in children’s intestines, leading to their spread and consequent illness. Herbal healers or *ciarmavermi* treated the condition using a mixture of natural remedies and spells.

In Lucania, southern Italy, it is still believed by some that mastitis can be caused by a baby sucking a hair from its mother’s head and accidentally pushing it into the

integral part of “official” medicine in the medieval west, was widely adhered to in the early modern period despite increasing criticism, and continues today in some alternative and folk medical traditions.

The doctrine of signatures is one aspect of a more general ancient notion regarding the laws of sympathy in the natural world, and between the natural and supernatural realms. Hidden symbolic and physical associations exist between people and other living things, spirits and inanimate substances, and this means that actions affecting one also influence the other. The classic example is the hair of the dog, whereby rabies was thought to be cured by putting hair from the offending dog on the bite wound.

There are many other examples in European folk medicine, such as the cure of congenital hernia by splitting the trunk of a tree, usually oak or ash, passing the affected infant through it and binding the tree up again. As the tree healed so would the ruptured muscle in the child’s groin. Although the process was roughly the same across Europe, nineteenth- and twentieth-century folklorists have recorded a diverse range of associated rituals. In Portugal the rite had to be performed at midnight on St John’s Eve by three men named John, while three women named Mary spun thread and recited a charm. In Somerset, England, a virgin had to pass the child through the tree.

Sympathetic magic was commonly employed to cure witchcraft — so taking the heart of a dead bewitched cow, sticking it with pins and thorns, and then baking it, would cause the witch responsible to have excruciating

heart pains and force her or him to desist from further malicious acts. Taking the urine of a bewitched patient, placing it in a vessel along with some sharp objects, and boiling it, would similarly affect the witch.

Until the development and acceptance of theory about germs in the nineteenth century, folk medicine and orthodox medicine again shared similar or the same conceptions of contagion and how to deal with it. One significant difference between the two, however, concerned the folk medical notion that some diseases could not be destroyed and so cures could be achieved only by ritually transferring the illness to someone or something else. Several examples can be found in the archives concerning healers prosecuted under Scottish law against witchcraft.

In historical terms certain medical concepts, such as the doctrine of signatures, became definable as “folk” or “popular” once they had been discarded by orthodox medicine. The most obvious example of this concerns humoral theory. Ancient Greek physicians believed that health was governed by the balance of four substances — or humours — namely yellow bile, black bile, blood and phlegm. Illnesses were caused by the imbalance of these, which led to excessive heat/cold, moistness/dryness in the body.

Cures required the ingestion of foods, liquids or herbs that had hot/cold, wet/dry properties, which counteracted the identified imbalance, or methods such as bleeding, which reduced humoral excesses. In European popular culture people did not necessarily conceptualise health in humoral terms, but their practices and aetiologies were based on the theory as much as were legitimatised medicine’s. Once the European medical community had rejected it by the end of the eighteenth century, however, its continued influence became a marker of scientific backwardness.

Nevertheless, we should not label folk medicine as merely the rump of outmoded medical ideas. In its myriad manifestations it had its own distinct identity in local, regional and national contexts.

breast through the nipple. One reason for the continuance of the belief is that folk medicine not only provides what seems a clear causal explanation for the illness but also a dedicated remedy, which involves placing a hairbrush in the woman’s brassiere while a healer recites the following charm:

*“Good morning [or good evening],
Saint Miserano.”*

*There was a woman who washed.
“What do you have, my mother, that you
are always crying?”*

*“The hairs above my breasts.”
If you don’t say San Sini’ San Sena
Three from the mouth and three from
the nose.*

Doctrine of signatures

For people who had little or no awareness of the chemical structures of plants and their compounds, the key to curing both naturally and supernaturally inspired diseases lay in various rules that helped make sense of the hidden or occult properties of the plants and animals around them.

The doctrine of signatures — the notion that the physical appearance of a plant is indicative of its healing properties — was one of the enduring legacies of ancient Greek medicine. Through the writings of the Roman physicians Dioscorides (AD c.40–c.90) and Galen (AD c.129–c.216), it became an

This article is abridged from the chapter on “Traditional European folk medicine” by **Owen Davies**, within the recently published book ‘Traditional Medicine’ (2010), edited by **Steven B Kayne**. The book is available from Pharmaceutical Press (www.pharmapress.com)

