

King Henry VIII's Medical World

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Image making was central to the English Tudor world. To contemporaries King Henry VIII seemed to personify the pursuit of princely pleasure. He was wrote one famous chronicler, “undoubtedly the rarest man that lived in his time”. Another boasted of his proficiency at hawking, horsemanship and hunting. In early youth, he excelled at jousting, music and revelry. Later it was his lovemaking that brought him celebrated fame and infamy.

Looking now at the famous Holbein pictures of the period, Henry's majestic stature is still impressive.



Portrait of King Henry VIII in the Royal Collection at Windsor Castle by Hans Holbein

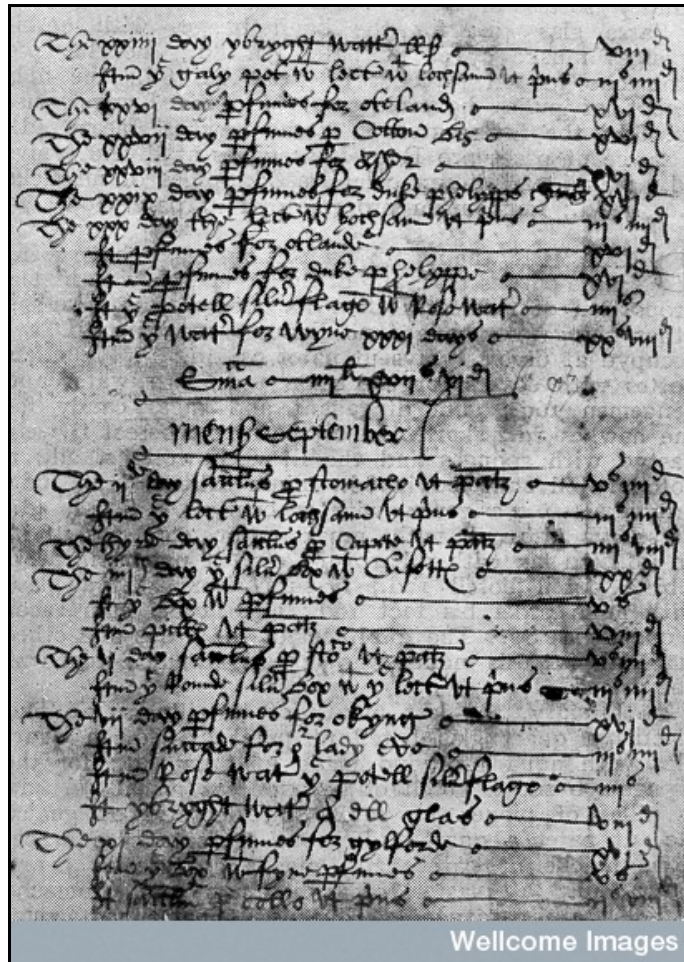
Source: Slide, M0019300, Wellcome Library, London.

Standing tall he stares back at the viewer with a confidence that captures his breathtaking masculinity. His popular image announces that there is no finer champion of the English cause. We gaze at his exceptional physical prowess. It is ironic then that it was not Henry's enemies nor his image-makers but his deep-seated hypochondria and medical predicaments that undermined this carefully crafted propaganda. For few could deny that the gout and ulcers of his old age tarnished the grandeur and promise of youth.

All his life Henry was fascinated by the contemporary skill, "physik". His favoured court physicians studied the best Greek and Latin medical treatises. John Chambers, for instance, was a privileged member of the Royal College of Physicians, the intellectual elite of the Tudor medical hierarchy. Royal patronage made him a famous court physician in an age when medicine was still an "uncertain science". Physicians were trained in all the intellectual refinements. They studied astronomy, astrology, geometry, mathematics, music, and philosophy. Chambers was a gentleman of good breeding, skilled in civility and intellectual invention to practice "physik" in its highest art form.

A physician treated a patient's mental, moral and physical needs. They were in effect skilled consultants, predecessors of their modern counterparts. Today doctors tend to be specialists in their respective fields. In the past, a physician would never have treated a sick person as a site of disease. They provided a very personal healthcare package. "Physik" was holistic, about balance in the entire body. If a leg or arm became diseased the root cause of the canker might be in the mind, in the organs, or human spirit. Physicians recognised too that if life was "God-given" it could also be "God-taken". The Tudors believed strongly in a divine plan. In the face of providence, medicine often floundered. Fate, fortune and goodwill might cure where "physik" failed. Against this backdrop, Henry consulted doctors throughout his life but maintained a healthy scepticism: a common trait amongst courtiers at the Tudor court.

Henry was not a passive patient. He did however put a lot of faith in the next rank of medical practitioners, the court apothecaries. His three favourites - Richard Babham, Cuthbert Blackenden and Thomas Alsop - had an unrivalled pharmaceutical knowledge.



Thomas Alsop, Apothecary to Henry VIII
 An account for medicines prepared for Henry VIII, 1546 (Public Record Office).

Source: Slide L0000422EA, Wellcome Library, London.

All were skilled herbalists. Royal patronage gave them access to medicinal plants grown in the kitchen gardens of the Tudor palaces. Familiar herbs such as willow bark were distilled to provide cures for everyday maladies like headaches. Today we know that this medical pharmacology was advanced. “Sit you under Ye willow tree”, advised a popular herb book of the time, “and it will cure Ye pain of Ye head”: willow bark is a source of aspirin. Before anaesthetics, preparations of arnica for bruising or mandrake for pain relief were proscribed for favoured senior courtiers. Sometimes, with the King’s permission, they were even used for love potions. Other well-known herbs provided homeopathic cures. Rosemary was an essential cooking ingredient to aid digestion whereas lavender was an insect repellent and cured insomnia. A balanced diet, clean clothing and regular exercise were part of a system of “physik” known as “regimen”. This

thinking regulated a patient's lifestyle, so that the apothecaries' art was pivotal to Tudor court life.

Occasionally Henry called in a surgeon. Although Henry ranked physicians and apothecaries above barbers and surgeons, he took a prestigious interest in the better regulation of all Tudor medical services. A famous Holbein picture celebrates the King handing a Royal charter unifying the Barber-Surgeons Company in 1540.



"King Henry VIII presenting a document of union to the Barber-Surgeons Company, 1540"
(engraving after Hans Holbein)

Source: Slide, L0012916, Wellcome Library, London

Thomas Vicary was the company's first master. He held the important position of sergeant-surgeon to the court in recognition of his surgical skill with battle wounds. War was always essential to medical advancement. Many barber-surgeons served in the army and navy. Contemporaries however felt ambiguous about surgery in peacetime. On the one hand surgical skill was praised. A swift barber-surgeon could amputate a leg in ten minutes, sealing around fifty-two arteries and veins. They covered the

cauterised stump with the skin of a pig to seal the wound from infection, preventing a patient bleeding out and sinking into a coma from the painful procedure. At the same time, barber-surgeons were ridiculed as buffoons, charlatans, and lowly doctors in the popular press. It was their “hands-on” style of medicine that shaped caricatures ridiculing them as “jacks of all trades”. Most pulled teeth, bled patients, stitched wounds and so on. Their close proximity to bodily fluids tarnished their medical image. Henry though valued their surgical services: nonetheless he always consulted physicians first and expected his apothecaries to remedy his everyday ailments.

Henry’s apothecaries were kept busy preparing medical recipes. He often needed regular “physik” to purge his bowels and relieve his constipation and gout. Like most courtiers, Henry also self-dosed. He owned a famous medicine cabinet in which he kept his latest remedies, though details of its contents have not been handed down. Sometimes he passed on a recipe or sent an apothecary to help a close family member, relative or friend. In an age when life expectancy was short, access to medical patronage could mean the difference between life and death. When illness struck a household most people prayed or clung to the forlorn hope that their folk remedies would work when threatened by epidemics. Others confronted death believing that the promise of an afterlife would compensate them for the pain of their short existence. The worst afflicted sometimes turned to magic potions and sorcery, thinking God had failed them. In truth, the Tudor medical fraternity was often confounded by the indiscriminate nature of death, dearth and disease.

Henry shared the medical hopes and fears of his people. In his early teenage years his elder brother, Arthur Prince of Wales, died of the “sweating sickness” (a Tudor form of cholera) in April 1502 at Ludlow Castle in Shropshire. Arthur’s premature death was a major influence on his younger brother’s life. Young Henry subsequently married his widowed sister-in-law, Katherine of Aragon, setting off a chain of events that would later culminate in his infamous divorce. In many respects the effect of Arthur’s death was much more mendacious than simply a bad marriage decision. It played continually on Henry’s mind. His greatest fear was that he would not live long enough to provide a male “heir and spare” to ensure the survival of the Tudor dynasty. Henry’s obsession with bloodlines

haunted his hypochondria. But there was also some justification for his worst medical terrors.

It has been estimated that between 1525 and 1527 nearly fifty people died every day from “sweating sickness” in London. Its early symptoms were fast-acting - virulent influenza and severe pulmonary pain. Patients struggled to breathe until their lungs filled with mucous. Many literally drowned in their own body fluids. It was a painful death. The problem was that it was very difficult for physicians to diagnose the difference between “the sweating sickness”, “the sweat” and “summer fever”. It was not certain whether they were different strains of the same disease. The “sweat” symptoms usually started with a “summer fever”. The patient soon developed severe cramp, headache and dizziness. A rash then broke out, covering their body with black spots. In four hours they were said to be as “stiff as a wall”. Small wonder Henry was alarmed when Anne Boleyn caught “the sweat” during the early stages of their courtship in June 1528. Henry immediately despatched medicines to Hever Castle in Kent with a love letter wishing her a speedy recovery. But he made it a rule never to visit the sick in person. He was always terrified of being contaminated. Given Arthur’s early death from the disease it was perhaps harsh of the French ambassador to write that Henry was “the most timid person in such matters you could meet with”.

A common way to stay healthy in Tudor times was to employ a barber-surgeon to bleed family members every spring equinox. Bleeding was believed to rebalance the body’s four humors - sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic. Throughout a patient’s life span all four humors were always present in the body. Each person’s anatomical structure was said to replicate the four seasons (spring, summer, autumn and winter), the four elements (fire, water, air and earth) and the twelve astrological signs. Medical theorists argued that bleeding alleviated the four humors with age. Any plethora of blood that had built up in the body over the winter period was drained from the patient’s arm by a small incision. Children and pregnant women were not subjected to this risky intervention. Popular belief however held that the date of one’s birth shaped the chief characteristics of each child. This meant that one humor governed every personality. In Henry’s case, his physicians decreed that he had a sanguine

Born under the sign of cancer, on 28 June 1491, he was governed by the watery and maternal cycles of the moon. His soothsayers looked for common diseases like agues, coughs, chlorosis, fever, green sickness, quinsy, rheumatism, smallpox and stones. His birth chart cast him as a cheerful, frivolous, and flirty child who would grow into a man of action. It also forewarned that he had excessive personality traits. He would be short-tempered, over-sensitive to criticism, drink too much, eat to excess, be very restless, enjoy rapacious sex, have frequent wet dreams, suffer from blinding headaches, experience painful constipation and be troubled by poor sleeping patterns. The soothsayers' predictions were remarkably prosaic. Henry's "maladies of the mind", as one senior courtier described them, were linked to his fear of sterility and tumultuous romantic history.

When the soothayers cast Henry's birth chart, they perhaps should have paid greater attention to his heart. Later it became apparent that a boy born under the water-sign of cancer governed by the feminine moon had an obsessive interest in childbirth, lovemaking and courtly romance. Yet to appreciate fully why he developed these traits it is essential to delve deeper into his family psyche. Margaret Beaufort, Henry's grandmother, bequeathed a terrible standard to her grandson. At just thirteen years old, she gave birth to King Henry VII (Henry's father). The birth was excruciatingly painful and prolonged. Her womb prolapsed but she had also fulfilled her duty. Her only male child secured the Tudor line of succession.



The Three Children of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York – Prince Arthur (middle), Prince Henry (left) and Princess Margaret (right).

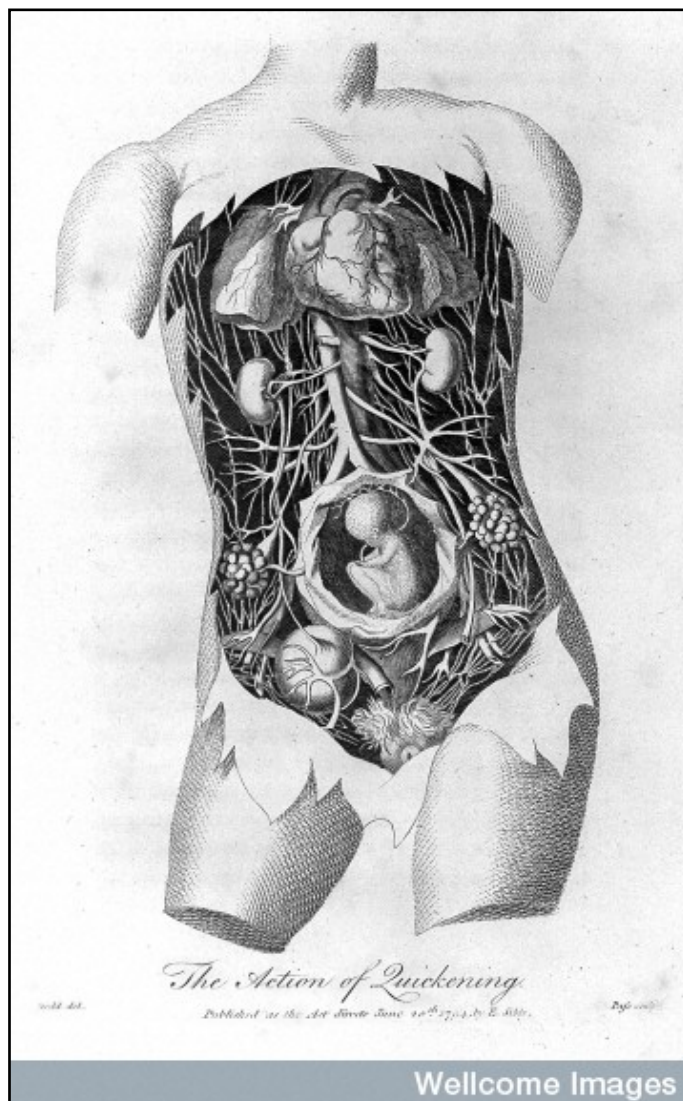
Note: Prince Arthur died at the age of 16, his brother Henry then became heir to the throne, later becoming King Henry VIII.

Engraving by George Vertue, 1748.

Source: Slide, 5704491, Iconographic Collection, Wellcome Library London.

To young Henry, his grandmother personified the supreme female sacrifice. Where she had succeeded, he could not fail. His cold and calculating drive to serve dynastic ends made Henry an obsessive husband. Though reported to be a considerate and affectionate lover, he also bullied his wives in the bedchamber. This context would result in a litany of failed childbirth attempts that beleaguered his six marriages.

It is a curious fact that by the time Henry's early wives carried to term, they fell into a modern conception-category - "elderly primagravida" (pregnant women 35+). Relentless attempts to conceive meant that Katherine of Aragon and later Anne Boleyn were older mothers. After the "quickening" each experienced a much higher risk of miscarriage and stillbirths.



"The action of quickening".
in
The medical mirror; or treatise
on the impregnation of the
human female. Shewing the
origin of diseases, and the
principles of life and death
by
Ebenezer Sibly, (engraving,
Champante & Whitrow) London,
1794

Source: Slide L0013166,
EPB/48156/B, Wellcome Library,
London

Henry was evidently a born romantic. Sex had to be heartfelt. He was also ignorant of the fact that his biological clock was ticking too. Recent biomedical studies have shown that low birth rates and infertility in middle-age men are caused by obesity. Men can also cause miscarriages by passing on sexually transmitted diseases to their partners. Henry would surely have been fascinated by the science of sex selection and IVF, grasping the chance to extend a couple's childbearing life cycle into middle age.

Instead in middle age Henry developed infected fistulas along his limbs. Sometime in May 1538 they became blocked with a blood clot. For about twelve days it looked like he might die. Although he made a full recovery, in old age the condition returned, constantly after his sixth marriage to Kateryn Parr. His hypochondria now gave full vent to his worst paranoia. Doctors were confounded by his constipation. He soon developed painful piles. Only rhubarb, a traditional cure, seemed to give him some relief from the pain. His urine was examined daily to prevent fever raging through his body. His obesity was in fact the root cause of his excessive night sweats. It is likely that he was diabetic too. He often had an unquenchable thirst, a key symptom of insulin deficiency. Henry was limp and lame. Daily he suffered shortness of breath. The court apothecaries tried to alleviate his ulcerated legs with poultices. The smell of the bandages was often very offensive. The ulcerated wounds festered with the pus oozing out. Henry's household accounts show that he spent vast sums on perfumes to disguise the smell of decay emanating from his beleaguered body.

It was death, on 28 January 1547, that ended the ravages of "Good Harry's" romantic past, princely pleasures, and physical predicaments. It was reported that his people mourned his passing with affection. The devout and superstitious though marvelled at God's judgement. His body exploded in its coffin on the final journey from Syon Abbey to Windsor Castle. Was this divine retribution? The King had destroyed the monasteries and their local medical services, which had served the common people for centuries. Beneath the royal propaganda and paint of image-making was a complex medical legacy. Perhaps too much had been expected of a prince beset by dynastic ambition, hypochondria and the fear of death. Five hundred years after his accession to the English throne, Henry's medical condition continues to open a window on a fascinating Tudor time. Standing today

beneath the famous astronomical clock it is his “physik” that still strikes down the centuries at Hampton Court Palace.