



Doctors Doing Harm Since Hippocrates

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We all face disease and death, and rely on the medical profession to extend our lives. Yet, David Wootton argues, from the fifth century BC until the 1930s, doctors actually did more harm than good. In this controversial new account of the history of medicine, he asks just how much good it has done us over the years, and how much harm it continues to do today.

Bad Medicine: Doctors Doing Harm Since Hippocrates Details

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Arica says

K. Codell Carter's books are far better in explaining the history and philosophy of medicine.

Tlaura says

This is an interesting, brisk potted history of medicine written for people like me who have read some history of science but don't know much about the history of medicine. Unfortunately, it's marred by the author's weird, grandiose attempts to turn minor disagreements with mainstream historical interpretations into existential critiques of academic history. For example, Wootton dates the birth of modern medicine in 1865 with the rise of Listerian antiseptic surgical practice. Other academic historians (apparently following Foucault) have chosen to date it from the 1790s when, in France, medicine began to be provided by state-provided doctors working in public clinics rather than mainly through private practice. For Wootton, this difference in opinion is due to the fact that "many [historians] don't actually believe that science progresses." This argument doesn't make much sense on its face and Wootton's attempts to elaborate don't really help. Wootton defends his dating by arguing that medicine couldn't progress until the germ theory came in during the second half of nineteenth century but *Bad Medicine* contains three examples of eighteenth century innovations -- the treatment of scurvy with lemon juice, widespread use of the birthing forceps, and Jenner's cowpox vaccination for smallpox -- that are now thought to have reduced fatalities *more* than antiseptic surgery did. Earlier, he makes a fuss over the neglect of one of his heroes, Felix Platter, a German anatomist living just before Harvey who hypothesized something that looks like a modern germ theory. In fact, Platter is one of the few characters in the book I had heard of because he is a big deal in the history of optics. Platter published a very accurate anatomy of the human eye which probably facilitated the discovery of the retinal image (another discovery, like the circulation of the blood, that was ignored or contested by much of the medical establishment for at least a century after its appearance even though it was picked up and accepted by physicists and mathematicians almost immediately.) So the issue is apparently that Platter isn't celebrated for the right reasons, an interesting, even thought-provoking suggestion, of which there are many in *Bad Medicine*. But it's hardly grounds for the claim (quoting Wootton in response to one of his critics) that "What is at stake here is nothing less than what is history, and who controls it."

I. says

The material is interesting but the 'I'm going against the grain! Look at me! Against the grain! Here is my against the grain thesis statement once more!' tone made me kind of wary. I'm also not sure what he says about ancient medicine and its influence is entirely correct. I just didn't really get a sense that Wootton knew what he was talking about - most of it sounded like cherry picking. It's a shame because the idea - trying to find out why medicine took as long as it did to advance - is interesting. It just doesn't translate into anything in this book. I have really no sense of why x idea/practice wasn't adopted when it was discovered apart from the fact that stasis exists and scientists back then weren't very methodical.

Zeyd says

Engrossing and terrifying investigation into the history of medicine. Read with a sick bag handy, if of weak disposition.

E. Davies says

Terrific. Brief, pointed, thoughtful and superbly original. Wootton, who is not a doctor, points out what they rarely do - that throughout human history, going to see a doctor has generally been bad for your health. He explores why this was and why it changed, all with gripping prose and a surprisingly small number of pages.

Harvey says

- choppy, accusatory argument that medicine, as an organized profession and historical fallacy, plotted to hinder progress, resist life-saving innovations, and experiment with vivisection

John says

Read it. <https://psychiatricurvivors.wordpress...>

Luke Echo says

Randomly picked this up at Oxfam the other day. Its quite interesting stuff and really gets going towards the end. I thought it needed a rather more thorough editor though. Its a bit plagued by repetition in parts.

Endre Fodstad says

Wootton's book is thought-provoking for a number of reasons, especially when you, as I am, are interested in early technology. His point about the basis of Hippocratic/Galenic medicine (as apart from remedies not related to the underlying theory, and practical surgery) being complete ineffective nonsense - which, of course, is essentially true - should be made more often by the historians of ancient, medieval and early modern medical history. I knew the system was stubbornly maintained long beyond its expiration date, but I was surprised at Wootton's examination of its persistense into the 19th and even the 20th centry. His book might read as being more aggressive than it really is - it is a story of BAD medicine, so the success stories get only brief mention. Sometimes, this is a problem, as you get the impression that he is overstating his case. On the whole, however, this is a book everybody interested in the history of western and middle eastern medicine should read before they read anything else - it serves a bitter, but necessary, pill to the idea of

constant progress and reminds us that often, the "wisdom of the ancients" and respect for old authorities was a leg iron to the progress of human advancement.
