

BBC Bitesize

The Medieval period was famous for disgusting disease, strange superstitions and, of course, massive beards.

This was a time of crafty clergymen and wicked witch doctors, chipping in with bonkers ideas. But, to understand this crazy period, we need to go back even further.

Meet Hippocrates...The father of modern medicine, and the owner of a fabulous beard.

Unlike other doctors of the time, who prayed to the gods for help, he believed in careful observation, and bodily treatments. Hippocrates thought that to treat people effectively we must first try to understand how the human body worked...

He invented the theory of 'The Four Humours' which hypothesised that the body contained four substances: Black Bile, Yellow Bile, Blood, and Phlegm.

He said that if any of the four humours were out of balance you'd become ill. To bring them back into balance he suggested purging, or even bleeding. Which, aside from achieving nothing, was quite frankly gross and rather messy!

But some of Hippocrates' less bonkers ideas have stood the test of time and are still used today, nearly 2,500 years later. Like the Hippocratic Oath, which says doctors must do their patients no harm...or at least not intentionally. So he was more than just a pretty beard after all. Let's give him a jolly loud round of applause! Yes, well done!

Another influential beard, umm...sorry...err...physician, was Claudius Galen. Galen lived in Rome, and made many major breakthroughs in anatomy...which is basically the study of the inner workings of the body. And also involves loads of cutting up animals like pigs, apes, and even some humans... yuck!

Galen's influence and discoveries, such as that arteries carry blood, remained hugely influential and unchallenged for almost fifteen centuries after his death. So he must have been heading in the right direction...

Fast forward a few hundred years, and things got dark. Not literally; but things were 'dark' and a bit depressing generally. The Roman Empire split in two. War broke out across the whole of Europe; death and destruction was rife. And people were suffering. They needed hope from a higher place; and so a supernatural approach to medicine reared its head once again...I'm with you, Hippocrates!

The muddled madness of the supernatural Dark Ages soon gave way to The Middle Ages. But medicine didn't get much better. By now, the Church held a tight grip over medical ideas, and preached that sickness was divine punishment for sin. The Church did allow dissection, but the results would have to support the old ideas of Galen.

Galen's theories suited the Church's notion of there being only one god, who created humans and their body parts...for a purpose. Doctors' treatments were still based on Hippocrates' 'Four Humours,' and with most people not being able to afford them anyway...they turned instead to

apothecaries, monks, and wise-men, who had about as much medical knowledge as one of Galen's apes. It really was monkey business.

Things were bad! People were sick...getting sicker, or just plain dead. Even the monarchy didn't want to get involved because they thought public health was beneath them. So people continued to be treated by untrained surgeons who, if you were lucky, may have picked up a few tips on the battlefield; or who, if you were unlucky, may have simply got bored of... cutting hair.

"I asked for a short back and sides!"

Enter...The Black Death. One of the biggest pandemics in history, it wiped out 40% of Britain's population. Thanks to over-crowding, poor living conditions, and terrible public health, the Black Death spread rapidly and was near impossible to control. The disease caused violent fever, oozing sores, and swollen armpits.

(Ooh...Ooh...Ooh...Nice!)

At the time, no-one had a clue what caused it.

(Squeak, squeak)

Most people believed it was a curse from God. And started praying like mad. Some doctors advised not to overeat or overdrink. Others recommended simply chanting spells, or lighting candles to ward off evil spirits. Some people even used shaved chickens to try and cure themselves. And you can just imagine how effective rubbing raw chicken into an open, gaping wound was, can't you...?

So we finish these 450 medieval years almost where we started: Galen's influence still overshadowed medical thought; people believed superstitions and prayer could cure all; medicine was strangled by the over-reaching arms of the Church; barbers were moonlighting as surgeons; doctors were flying the flag for Hippocrates; chickens were getting a raw deal...

(raw...haha...sorry);

...and so progress was as fast as one of Galen's

mutilated pigs running the 100 metres.

(Squeal)

I think you get the picture?