

UTMJ Reviews – History of Medicine

History of Medicine: A Scandalously Short Introduction

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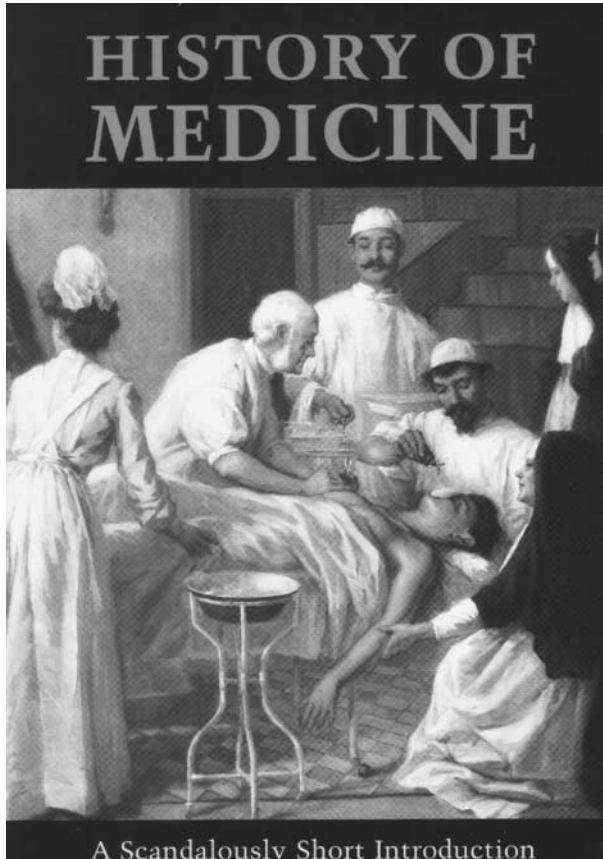
Written by: Jacalyn Duffin

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Hippocrates is often revered as the “father of medicine”. He emphasized case histories, natural causes of disease, and a strict ethical code, concepts that are still with us today some 2500 years later. We might criticise him, however, for promoting the theory that illness is the result of an imbalance of bodily fluids he referred to as “humours,” for teaching medicine only to men, and for forbidding abortion. Is Hippocrates, then, a hero or a villain?

For years, Dr. Jacalyn Duffin’s first-year medical students have answered “hero!” without fail. This answer is instructive, she tells us, because it demonstrates how eager they are to assume a glorious past for what, from their perspective, is a glorious profession. But Duffin objects, both to the answer and to the underlying attitude. She asserts that because history is a complex enterprise of selecting and interpreting evidence, neat labels like “hero” or “villain” cannot easily be applied. She challenges her students’ unquestioning acceptance of their profession. Her book is meant as an introduction for students, scientists and practitioners who want to develop tools for thinking critically about the history of medicine.

The tools that Duffin offers are decidedly post-modern. She encourages the reader to think of theories of illness as social constructs, influenced by prevailing attitudes and beliefs, both scientific and non-scientific. She cites as an example homosexuality, which was viewed first as sinful and therefore criminal in the middle ages, then as a disease by the late 19th century and well into the 20th century, and now as a variation of normal. This metamorphosis, she asserts, occurred with changes in the cultural and socio-political climate. She also discourages value judgements about the past, like “hero” and “villain.” Instead, the reader is urged to ask why people believed and behaved the way they did, and what led to changes in those ideas and practices. To return to our example of Hippocrates, we might find it unsurprising that physicians would transform the reigning philosophical doctrine of four elements into a theory of four humours when conjecturing about physiology and disease. Similarly, Hippocrates’ requirement that doctors swear to teach their art only to men should be examined in the context of the role that men and women played in Ancient Greece.

Duffin structures her work around discrete histories of selected medical sciences (anatomy, physiology, pathology and pharmacology) and specialities (haematology, surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology, psychiatry, paediatrics and family medicine). She also includes chapters on health care delivery, epidemic diseases, technology and, as a conclusion, a “How-to” chapter on studying medical history. This “scandalously short introduction” twists and turns through various past peoples, places and ideas. Duffin also incorporates some important ideas about history as an exercise (historiography) and about the intersection of science and philosophy with medicine. The result is a style that, although diffuse, is provocative. The chapters are written to stand independently, a format that is useful both to medical students who want to “follow along” as they proceed through their curriculum, and to those who have specific interests. The corollary is that someone who reads the book from cover to cover may want a more integrated and developed approach to the many interesting ideas she presents.

The text is punctuated with boxes containing anecdotes, quotations as well as other ideas and figures, emphasizing important points and adding interest and flavour. Because some of these inclusions are also examples of primary sources of historical information, the reader has an opportunity to do history by practising observation and interpretation, often without the benefit of the

author’s own analysis. Duffin’s educational objectives and extensive reading lists (which include Canadian sources) enhance the book’s utility as a learning tool.

As a historian, Duffin is aware that her own identity plays an important role in how she portrays her subject. She accepts and embraces her biases as a woman, haematologist and historian. For example, she includes feminist theory in her discussion of obstetrics and gynaecology, she devotes a whole chapter to explaining “why blood is special,” and she incorporates a healthy dose of history theory into her analysis. Her identity also comes through in her style: her vibrant personality and gifts as a teacher shine throughout the book, distinguishing it as a fun and thoughtful introduction to the topic.