

Brief history of medicine

Abstract

This article aims to shed light on the historical context of the development of medicine, bringing to light characteristic elements of its construction, since antiquity, starting with the Egyptians, advancing through the Greeks, entering the Middle Ages, passing through the Renaissance and making a contrast with the so-called esoteric procedures in the 19th century, which made a contrast with the current models, due to the fact that they acted with more subtle energies and were unproven according to the parameters of the time.

Keywords: History, medicine, concepts, vitalism, empiricism, materialism

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Introduction

Since ancient times, different peoples have organized methods and concepts in the search for the eradication of diseases. This article sought, very briefly, to explain temporal evolution, from the Egyptians to modern man, seeking to emphasize the 18th and 19th centuries, which are extremely important today.

Main body

This article aims to shed some light on the historical context, bringing to light characteristic elements of the construction of medicine. Ancient doctors had relatively complex and effective concepts, practices and means in the task of preventing and restoring health. For example, in Egypt, following the discovery in 1873 of a voluminous roll of papyrus by Georg Ebers, a dedicated German Egyptologist, there was a surprising art of healing, through the practice of primitive surgeries with knowledge of human anatomy, treating everything from fractures, up to the use of many substances taken from plants, minerals and animals. Among these ingredients, products only found in China, such as cinnamon and pepper, demonstrating the commercial interaction between these peoples. The document called the "Ebers Papyrus" has been dated to more than 3500 years ago. Due to the fact that knowledge was only passed on to a select caste of individuals, the science of ancestral therapies ended up being diluted in the sands of time.

In Ancient Greece, Greek medicine emerged from primitive magic, as everything was credited to the gods. Religiosity was omnipresent in Greek society, considering this system as a religious civic, that is, everything revolved around civic events based on processions and offerings to the most different gods. Around 700 BC, Aesculapius had more than three hundred temples spread across the Greek city states.

Hippocrates, born on the island of Kos in 460 BC, ended up changing the previously existing panorama by establishing that the objective of medicine was to alleviate and subsequently eliminate the patient's pain. To this end, he replaced ritualistic magic with means tested and proven by practice. Its most important aspects were the attentive observation of symptoms, openness to ideas from all sides and a deep desire to explain the causes of illnesses. For him, the human body was part of a whole, a dynamic natural force (*vis medicatrix naturae*), responsible for the harmony of the organism. Physiology, the science of healthy man, pathology, or the science of man, and finally therapeutics or the art of treating the sickness, emerged. His followers carried out the Hippocratic teachings mechanically and the doctrine of the master of Kos lost its philosophical basis.

Hippocrates was a vitalist, as he developed, through experimentation and observation of natural phenomena, fundamental concepts based on the existence of a vital principle, just like the ancient Egyptians initiated the art of healing. But, starting with Claudius Galen, born in Pergamum, Asia Minor, in 129 AD and died in 216, Western medicine took a huge turn. Unlike his predecessors, Galen focused his efforts on trying to combat diseases through substances, compounds and treatments based on the principle of *contraria contrariis*, the therapy of opposites, since, for him, the most important thing was to achieve the balance of organic substances, that is, it gave heat when the disease caused cold, purgatives when the sick person was burdened. Hence the use of bloodletting, a healing theory on the contrary that would become the main foundation of the allopathic and empiricist method that continues to this day in traditional medicine, persisting in its works until the 19th century.

His method is based on the theory of humors, as life was maintained by the balance between the four humors – blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile, representing, respectively, heart, brain, liver and spleen. The imbalance would be the disease. We still use these nomenclatures today when referring to different physiological types such as sanguine, phlegmatic, bilious or choleric. For Galen, emotions and temperaments would originate from the body's organs, therefore based on matter. Continuing, we saw how the art of healing went from a vitalistic system to a materialistic vision. Now we will continue by inserting the Church's appropriation of Galen's *modus operandi*.

According to Galen, treatments of body fluids could change moral conditions and, therefore, in the Middle Ages, this thought allowed the conclusion that it is the body that corrupts the spirit, that is, the flesh is weak. Galen's medicine was convenient for the Church because it supported all the dogmas of its doctrine.

Refuting the knowledge of the ancient Greeks because they were pagans, patristic thinkers formed a doctrinal body foreign to reason, imposed by the authority they themselves granted, indifferent to the philosophical conditions created by their literal and distorted interpretations of the Bible and other works. With the decline of the Roman Empire and the barbarian invasions, poverty spread in Europe and with it, the diseases and epidemics that swept through populations. As a result, superstitious practices and beliefs in rituals and magic in mystical temples resurfaced. Knowledge was restricted to schools attached to abbeys and cathedrals until the 12th century with the formation of the first secular universities.

Under the rule of the Church, healing was seen as a miracle, a divine intervention that defied the laws of nature. Health or illness,

everything depended on God's will. The rituals and magic of pagan temples returned, but now dressed up with other nomenclatures, such as holy water, exorcism, priestly blessing and so on... Diseases were punishments from God arising from original sin. Suffering was a blessing, as it punished the evil of the body. One may wonder why his teachings have lasted so long without checking for errors. Initially, their texts were used without any development, correction, clarification or improvement. Medicine was taught with strict conservatism, without debates or discussions. Teaching was based on methodical and monotonous reading of works.

Another explanation was that the dissection of human corpses remained prohibited by the Church. Galen's doctrine was followed by doctors and their practices were repeated to the letter, transmitted from generation to generation, creating an obstacle to the art of healing. Galenism, an immobile and repetitive doctrine, dominated medicine, dogmatically imposing allopathy. In the same vein, Thomas Aquinas, in the 13th century, established the unity of the human being, with the soul being a substance defined with the "form" of the body. His thought, derived from Aristotle, but permeated with dogmatic positions, served as a glove for maintaining the Church's doctrine.

From the Lateran Council (1215), in Rome, clerics were prohibited from performing surgeries, doctors and preachers delimited their areas of activity and functions; the soul would be treated by the Church and the body by doctors. In any case, because the flesh is corruptible and weak as a result of original sin, the Church maintained the ancient stance of claiming miraculous cures through promises, pilgrimages, holy waters, and, to this day, it is necessary for miracles to occur so that saints can be canonized, usually through miraculous cures. Even so, calls for reform began to emerge in the 13th century, frightening the Church. The year 1233 was the year in which the Inquisition was created and on December 9th of 1484 the promulgation of the bull persecuting witches carried out by Pope Innocent VIII.

Men like Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim Paracelsus, or simply Paracelsus, born in Switzerland on November 10, 1493, were revolutionaries and faced the dogmas that hampered medicine through the return of Hippocratic simplicity, learning popular medicine. It was believed in the power of nature to heal the body and mind and in man's communion with the universe. The true art of healing was resumed. Paracelsus spoke with butchers and barbers of the time in order to understand the human body and its pathologies. Through experimentation and monitoring the habits of his patients, he made several discoveries about the development of diseases and the effects of medications.

The use of medicines was based on the theory of similars – like cures like – and on the health concepts of balancing the vital fluid of the spirit that inhabits the body, resuming the Hippocratic current. The foundations of magnetism and homeopathy were laid. Even so, his ideas were far ahead of the men of his time. The natural sciences continued to make great discoveries in the 17th century, but a huge gap grew between the progress of these sciences and medicine, as doctors were averse to changes and novelties and medicines and treatments continued to depend on authority, tradition and superstition, avoiding logic and observation.

The humor system resisted time, even if patients were victims of it. The bilious disease was combated with vomiting, the mucous disease with purgatives, the nervous disease with antispasmodics and the inflammatory disease with bloodletting. In the Renaissance, Ambroise Paré, realized the importance of asepsis in the treatment of men injured by bullets and by overcoming the prohibition on the

dissection of bodies, doctors such as the Flemish André Vesálio were able to revolutionize knowledge of the human body.

In medical philosophy, Rene Descartes, who once said "I think, therefore I am", born of the rational method, enabled the emergence of a science that questioned the vitality of the organism as having a principle that differed from inorganic matter and, consequently, studied the essence of the substance of the soul, now a concrete being, independent of the body, with its own characteristics that are different from organic ones. This created the distinction between the spirit and the body as independent substances and the recognition of an organic vitality independent of the soul.

In the Enlightenment, in the 18th century, at the Faculty of Medicine of Montpellier, France, vitalism received academic production and the support of solid theses, through the rescue of academic works and works published by doctors, physicists, chemists, biologists, physiologists and vitalist botanists of the 18th and 19th centuries. The first exponent of the resurgence of the spiritualist movement was Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688 – 1772). Swedish mystic, a man of remarkable knowledge, had his psychic awakening at the age of 25. His ideas came to anticipate the central propositions of spiritualism, especially regarding contact between the physical and spiritual worlds. By stating that he was always communing with the spiritual world, Swedenborg rekindled the flame of the occult in the mentality of men.

In this aspect, it is worth highlighting that the return of popularity of everything that is or is hidden has always been present in European culture. According to Mircea Eliade, through the most recent studies, has found that this phenomenon is reminiscent of a pre-Christian fertility cult and that with this, the real meaning and cultural function of a large number of recorded occult practices and theories, both European as non-European and at all levels of culture, from popular rites – such as magic and witchcraft – to the most erudite and sophisticated secret techniques and esoteric research: alchemy, yoga, tantrism, Gnosticism, Renaissance hermeticism and Masonic lodges from the Enlightenment period.

Another movement that had great power to penetrate Europe was mesmerism. The German doctor Franz Anton Mesmer¹ introduced into the academic field in the 18th century the possibility of scientifically proving the survival of the soul and communication with the dead. According to him, there exists in the human being, as well as in all of nature, a magnetic energy that can be manipulated by will and the use of the hands and the possibility of this energy being put at the service of Medicine.

Mesmer's arrival in Paris took place in February 1778 and he announced his discovery of an ultra-fine fluid that penetrated and surrounded all bodies. Mesmerism found strength in pre-revolutionary society (1780) due to expressing its faith in the Enlightenment and in reason taken to the extreme, an unbridled Enlightenment that would later provoke a movement to the opposite extreme, in the form of romanticism. Mesmerism also played a role in this movement: it showed the point where the two extremes touched. Mesmer's fluid needed a free path to circulate through the human body and when interrupted, it would cause diseases. To restore health, magnets were applied to the affected parts and this was later modified by the laying on of hands.

Another exponent in medicine who went against conventional treatments was Christian Friedrich Samuel Hahnemann² creating a new type of treatment, homeopathy, whose healing principle is the similarity of symptoms (*similia similibus curantur*) whose guidelines

follow the principle that for the body to function harmoniously, it is necessary for vital energy (fluid) to course through the body without interruption or in an inappropriate manner. If this does not happen, the disease sets in, making it necessary to reestablish the balance through the ingestion of substances that would have similar actions in a healthy man. Both mesmerism and homeopathy could not be scientifically proven by the current standards of the time because they were beyond the reach of the academic scope, both being linked to the context in vogue as a counterpoint to the materialist thinking current in European prosceniums since the seventeenth century.

Philosophically, homeopathy is a vitalist system, that is, a system that defends the idea of the existence of a vital principle, which cannot be empirically proven because it is immaterial, but which is the explanatory cause of the activity that animates the entire organism. Vital force is the intermediate principle between the physical body (material principle) and the spirit (spiritual principle). With this postulate, Hahnemann overcame the matter x spirit dualism, inherited from rationalism. The animation of the organism, that is, life, was not due to matter or spirit, but rather to a third principle, immaterial and dynamic, which linked those two. Spiritualists and materialists accepted Hahnemann's explanatory vitalism. The understanding of fluid was later appropriated by Kardec³ in the explanation of what permeates everything and everyone in the Universe. Against this background, in a rich environment and with scientific promises that entertained the public with any hypothesis that had scientific resonances and explained the wonders of nature, mesmerism and homeopathy found space in the mentality of the population.

Following the same path, the fashion for occultism was created by a French seminarian, Alphonse Luois Constant, born in 1810 and known by his nom de plume, Eliphas Lévi⁴, postulated that this revival of occultism had to do with the abuses committed by the Catholic religion and subsequent decline with the loss of its sovereignty, being more criticized in the 18th century, but, in his view, high magic escapes incredulity and ignorance, because it is equally based on science and faith. Lévi died in 1875, but left a large number of followers of his ideas.

At the same time, it begins to spread in European salons, coming from North America. At this point it is worth highlighting that in 1848 in the county of Hydesville, a typical village in the State of New York, where the first demonstrations with raids took place. The house was inhabited by a Methodist family named Fox and after several incidents, it was possible to verify that the sounds were not produced by demons or God but by the spirit of a man. Charles Rosma communicated, informing the indications of his passage through the residence where he was killed by the previous owner, being buried underground. Communication was only possible due to the mediumship of the Fox sisters.

The fashion for turning tables was produced through the formation of a magnetic chain produced by the participants. The table, in addition to rotating, answered people's questions by knocking. According to Lévi, the phenomena that have recently shaken America and Europe, regarding talking tables and fluidic manifestations, are nothing other than magnetic currents that are beginning to form and, requests from nature that invite us, for the salvation of humanity, to reconstitute the great sympathetic and religious chains.

In the 1850s, turning tables became a rage in Paris and led many serious scientists to try to decipher how such phenomena were produced. Among these researchers, one of them was Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, later known as Allan Kardec⁵, the codifier of

the spiritist doctrine. Even so, with the reigning empiricist science and without the possibility of verifying the vital fluid, a large joint manifesto was published in which it was declared that "all phenomena of organic matter, including consciousness, will be explained only through physical concepts and chemicals." This declaration was followed by the signatories and their disciples, solidifying the materialist basis of official medicine.

Medicine in the 19th century decided to consolidate itself in a dogmatic position, taking into account only physical-chemical phenomena to explain a nature that transcends these limits. It was influenced by empiricism, positivist philosophy and the nascent philosophical materialism, relegating the therapies of vitalist science to its margins. Today, geneticists, supported by neurologists and materialist psychologists, have developed the theory that genes are responsible for temperaments and other characteristics of the human personality. As every coin has two sides, animal magnetism and homeopathy therapies emerged at the same time as an answer, as they completely replaced the allopathic therapy created by the mechanistic tradition. Modern spiritist science, based on Spiritism, confirmed the philosophical and scientific bases of these sciences, allowing a more elastic view of human physiology in all its complexity.

It is interesting to note that, even so, we are still immersed in a universe of disbelief of the spirit, rooted in the materialist conception. I write this statement because Brazilian neuroscientists from the Instituto D'Or de Pesquisa e Ensino (Idor) launched a study in which the brain would be responsible for processing values such as altruism, generosity or laziness, in other words, science assigns the organ physical processes inherent to the spirit. According to the researchers, everything would be explained by brain activities, physical-chemical processes again.

Kardec⁶ postulated that emotions are in the moral conditions of the spirit that inhabits the body, because, even if the temperament of that body offers inclinations for certain reactions, it can be dominated by moral action in the domain of its attitudes. As long as science does not separate itself from the materialist basis, we will be subject to this type of conclusion, that is, the values acquired in the spirit's past experiences before the current incarnation. Thinking that we are products of chance and a pile of cells, amino acids and minerals is belittling creation and considering ourselves very small on the cosmic scale. I close the article with Plato⁷ in "Timaeus and Critias"; "Indeed, with regard to health or illness, virtue or vice, there is no regular measure or lack of measure that is of greater consequence than those of the soul in relation to the body."

We have to decentralize our brain and look for new horizons with an open mind to what we still don't understand.

Material and methods

The article was initially published in the local newspaper in the city where I live, Teresópolis, Rio de Janeiro, a long time ago, divided into three weeks. To this end, we used a bibliographical review and various notes already covered in other published works. Due to its fractional publication and in the journalistic environment, the bibliography was not included, as there was no intention of publishing it as a scientific article.

Results

It was possible to observe the dichotomy between vitalism and empiricist systems, mainly in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the consequences that remain in medical models to this day.

Discussion

Since Descartes in the 17th century, medicine has advocated symptomatic treatment taking into account only physical-chemical phenomena to the detriment of vitalist science therapies. The reinvigoration of the discussion began in the 1800s and, mainly in the 1800s, reached its peak with mesmerism, later identified as magnetism, hypnotism, homeopathy and with the rise of spiritualism in France, reinforcing the dualism between matter x spirit.⁸⁻¹²

Conclusion

Although we are still immersed in the duality of understanding between matter (body) and spirit (soul), more and more research shows that we are holistic beings, not separate, but in unison, being two sides of the same coin. With the internalization and search for internal answers to our own existence, man advances in his knowledge of himself.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflicts of interest

The conflict of interests, as already expressed above, represents a supposed duality between vitalist and empiricist systems, but which, in reality, are increasingly coming to the conclusion that they are part of a whole.

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