

BOOK REVIEW

Care in the Past: Archaeological and Interdisciplinary Perspectives ***Lindsay Powell, William Southwell-Wright and Rebecca Gowland (Eds.)***

Paperback, 208 pages
Oxbow Books
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On first inspection, a book about impairment and disability from the Palaeolithic period onwards, seems very ambitious. Can such a history be written given the paucity of physical and documentary material? Can it be both relevant and useful to us today and in the future? This edited collection of twelve essays resolutely answers both questions in the affirmative.

Care in the Past covers concepts, specific therapies, care at different stages of life and the evolution of that care. It offers important insights into the long-term care given to the weak and vulnerable, in our distant past, and among our close primate relatives. Taken together, the various chapters emphasise the importance of a life-course perspective in understanding the impact of impairment on the quality of life and on the chances of receiving care.

As a practitioner, seeing the whole person – and not just the medical or surgical or social aspect of a patient – is the desired goal. By using a broad perspective in examining the deepest histories, the authors may not be able to resurrect individual personalities, but do allow us to understand how patients experienced their worlds in physical, emotional and societal terms.

The parts of the book that really resonate for me cover my area of professional practice, namely paediatric neurodisability. Heidi Dawson's chapter adopts a "bio-archaeological" approach to the lives and deaths of children in the late Medieval period to suggest that, although growing up during this time was undoubtedly difficult, they were generally well cared for. Indeed, "*Medieval understanding of child development was not so different from our own*". In his contribution, Nick Thorpe emphatically demolishes the "no way to know" view concerning care, compassion and the societal view based on skeletal evidence alone. Instead, he powerfully argues that "*empathic behaviour and caring are the null hypothesis*".

I believe that *Care in the Past* will achieve its aim of becoming essential reading for both medical practitioners and medical historians. With the NHS still reeling from the revelations of the 2013 Francis Report, the Palaeolithic perspective brings both a comfort and a challenge.

Andrew N Williams
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