

BOOK REVIEW

Medicine, Knowledge and Venereal Diseases in England, 1886-1916 *by Anne R. Hanley*

Hardback, 318 pages
Palgrave Macmillan
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This book considers the societal, legislative, scientific and medical changes that influenced our understanding of, and responses to, syphilis and gonorrhoea. Throughout much of the 19th century, these diseases were seen as a problem of the socially and morally deviant, but the responses to them slowly changed as the century progressed. By the end of the period covered, these sexually transmitted diseases received recommendation for free and universally available healthcare in Britain. The state had recognised its role and responsibility in combating venereal diseases as a problem relevant to the whole of society.

The assimilation of new knowledge into the practice of public health was a complex process. The section of the book considering the education of doctors explains how a crowded curriculum drove this developing subject area into postgraduate courses available only in London. As a result, few doctors would have had the necessary information to provide state-of-the-art care and, where they did, the costs of the new procedures may well have prevented their application.

Separate chapters consider nursing and midwifery education where the prevailing view was that such delicate matters were not suitable subjects for young women to learn about. There was also concern though that they should not be told too much for fear that they might start discussing patients' problems with them. Such behaviour from non-medical staff was certainly not acceptable. Nurses and midwives were expected to be technically capable but no more. This posed a challenge because if they were to be informed, for safety reasons, of the infectious hazards of dressing patients' wounds, they were not allowed to tell patients about those same hazards.

Scientific developments at this time provided improved techniques for diagnosis such as the Wassermann reaction, the development of vaccines to prevent gonorrhoea, and the new drug salvarsan to treat syphilis. I was disappointed how little objective assessment there was of the contribution that these developments made to public health.

This learned, academic text does not make for easy reading but it richly illustrates the problems faced by healthcare professionals and contains a wealth of information of interest to the more general reader.

Tim Mason
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