

BOOK REVIEW

A Short History of Medicine *by Steve Parker*

Paperback, 400 pages
DK
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A Short History of Medicine aims to show how medicine changed over time using an anecdotal approach. The book contains short chapters on different topics within five main sections. The first covers beliefs and traditions from prehistory to the Middle Ages via Egypt, Hippocrates and Galen, has special pieces on bubonic plague and alchemy, and includes the practice of native African and American peoples as well as traditional medicine from China, India and other Asian cultures.

A similar mix of general history, the work of important individuals and selected subjects follows in subsequent sections. The rise of “scientific” medicine begins with the Arab revival and emergence of European schools of medicine, taking in major figures such as Paracelsus, Vesalius, Paré and Harvey, through to the development of the microscope, cellular pathology and vaccination, and has special pieces on bloodletting and smallpox.

Remaining sections – medicine in the “industrial age” 1820-1920, “modern” medicine 1920-2000, and the present and future of medicine – largely follow mainstream history. There are chapters on: key advances, such as anaesthesia and antibiotics, transfusion and transplantation, and treatment of cancer and viral diseases; key names, such as John Snow, Pasteur, Lister and Koch, and Florence Nightingale; and key topics, such as women in medicine, “mother and baby” medicine, medicine and the mind, care of the elderly, imaging and robotics, and complementary and emergency medicine.

In a work of such broad scope, it is inevitable that some things will be missing, but the absence of James Lind, scurvy and vitamins is a little surprising. There are no doubt other examples, although the book covers most of the expected highlights. A decent index and cross-referencing in the text aid navigation. While the book is evidently well researched, there are some simplifications, errors and omissions, and the bibliography of printed sources is disappointingly brief.

Steve Parker’s book is a compact version of his 2013 title *Kill or Cure: An Illustrated History of Medicine*. Although the publisher is renowned for its use of lavish colour illustrations, those in the new paperback are reproduced in black and white only, yet this hardly diminishes their value or impact. The large number and wide variety of the images is a real bonus.

A Short History of Medicine does not claim to be encyclopaedic in its coverage but does succeed in conveying the main ideas, advances and practices of medicine and how they developed over past centuries and millennia. It is well devised, full of interesting material, and easy to read. As such, it makes an excellent starting point for anyone new to the history of medicine.

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