

BOOK REVIEW

A History of the Medicines We Take: From Ancient Times to Present Day by Anthony C Cartwright and N Anthony Armstrong

Paperback, 336 pages
Pen & Sword Books
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Embracing a huge sweep of history from Neolithic times to the present day this book is ambitious in both scope and delivery. Part 1 takes a chronological approach to considering various medicines, mostly herbal, employed at different times. Part 2 takes a slightly different approach and considers the history of the different means of administering medicines, their dosage forms and vehicles.

I found Chapter 1, which includes a consideration of the dietary choices of various animals and early man for psychoactive and medicinal plants, fascinating. Mesopotamian and Egyptian medicines are also considered. Subsequent chapters cover Greek, Roman, Medieval and Early Modern medicine. Something of a whistle stop tour, attention is paid to major characters in the history of medicine – from Hippocrates to van Helmont – together with the items of *materia medica* they advocated.

The final four chapters of Part 1 bring the timeline up to the present by tackling the development and significance of herbal and animal products, antibiotics, synthetic drugs, modern medicines, pharmacogenomics, vaccines, antibodies and the role of biotechnology. The challenge of trying to cover this ambitious range is a tendency to descend into a compilation of lists. The authors mostly manage to avoid this trap by dividing the text into manageable and easily navigable sections through their use of subheadings and a logical classification system.

Part 2 of the volume is divided into 8 chapters which present a novel history of the various different means of introducing medicinal products into the body – oral, nasal, injection, via the skin, vagina and rectum, to the lungs and to the eyes. Interesting examples of various medicines from different eras in the history of medicine are provided by way of illustration. The authors draw upon some of the groundwork laid down in Part 1, but end up repeating some of the earlier material, albeit in contracted form. They are clearly in command of their subject and carefully define technical terms.

Clearly and intelligently written, the text refers to manuscript and archival sources, and primary and secondary literature, and is supported by an extensive and useful bibliography. Sixteen pages of numbered black and white illustrations on glossy paper are referred to directly in the text.

This volume would be a welcome addition to the bookshelves of a wide readership from the curious lay person to a wide cross-section of healthcare professionals and those with a particular interest in the history of pharmacy.

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