

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

History of medicine: teacher's notes

Aim: to use the Oxford DNB to find out about medicine and those who practised it. Depending on the time available and the ability of the students this lesson plan might be most suitable for two linked sessions, the first concentrating on the middle ages and the second on the early modern period. The dictionary includes men and women involved in a very wide range of medically related activities, especially in the period after 1500. You may prefer to browse the results of searches in advance and then direct the students towards particular people or groups which best fit what you have covered in the GCSE syllabus.

Among the 55,000 people included in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* are many who during their lives either practised medicine and healthcare or wrote about it. In this search you are going to focus on two periods to find out about different kinds of medical practitioners in the British past, to discover how people acquired knowledge about medicine and healing, and to uncover how they went about their work.

Log in to the Oxford DNB: click on the blue link: www.oxforddnb.com/subscribed. If you have access by username and password, you will be prompted to type them.

Medieval medicine

On the Subscriber page click on People search. Under 'Field of interest' click on Medicine. Select 'male'. Enter 1000 in the 'from' box and 1400 in the 'to' box. Click on 'Search'.

- How many results do you get? **32 in April 2006**

In the left hand pane select 'Death date order'.

Optional: this is just to give students a better sense of the results at a glance.

- Look at the occupations of the medical men you have found. Many are also remembered for other types of activity. Which of these is the most common?
One third are churchmen of some kind.
- Why do you think that so many of them have second occupations of this kind?
Few apart from clergy and monks had the education necessary to practise medicine. Closer links between science/medicine and religious observation than in the modern period. There was no clearly defined medical profession as such; people did not specialize in one area of expertise as in the modern period.
- Discuss your ideas with the rest of the class.

Divide the articles from the search above among your group or class. Looking at the article you have chosen or been given answer the following questions:

- What is his name?
- What are the dates of his birth and death?
- Where was he born?
- Where was he educated?
- What were his medical activities?
- Who were his patients?

- Find another interesting fact about his life.
- Compare your findings with those of the rest of the class or group.

Now do the same search as before, but tick the 'female' instead of the 'male' box. Look carefully at the result. [[1 group article on 10 female medical practitioners](#)]

- How do we know that medicine was practised by women as well as by men?
- What kind of medical activities were women involved in?

Early modern medicine

Return to the People search. Under 'Field of interest' click on Medicine. Under 'Sex' select All. Enter 1550 in the 'from' box and 1650 in the 'to' box. Click on Search.

- How many results do you get? **Over four hundred!**
- Why do you think that, for a much shorter period, there are so many more results?
 - *NB: There may be many answers to this question!*

More evidence available; bigger population; better medical education and wider circulation of knowledge; more developed medical profession; enhanced sense of professional identity; more urbanized society and more sophisticated economy.

Now narrow down your search to one group among medical practitioners. In your group or class choose to search for different types of people, as follows:

return to People search; under 'Field of interest' click on 'Open full list' (this will take some time to load); click on the + sign next to **Medicine**; click on one of the following words: **surgery, obstetrics (childbirth), nursing, mental health, medical science, writing and scholarship, education**; check that the date fields still say 1550–1650; click on 'Search'.

Looking at your results:

- How many are men and how many are women?
- How do your figures compare with those for other groups within medicine?

Choose two articles from your results. For **both articles** answer the following questions:

- What are their names?
- Where were they born?
- How and where were they educated?
- What were their medical activities?
- Who were their patients or customers?
- Did they have any other activities?

Present your information to the rest of the class or group.

Themes which may emerge include: immigrant contribution to the medical profession; education of physicians at university, including foreign universities like Leiden and Padua; lack of professional specialism; importance of 'folk' medicine; variety of activity by women; different medical provision for rich and poor; attitudes towards mental illness (see madhouse keeper!); medical discoveries.

- What changes can you see in the lives of medical practitioners since the middle ages?

Themes may include: variety of activity; greater education for some; greater respectability for some; changing attitudes to women practitioners.
- What seems to be the same as in the middle ages?

Persistence of popular remedies; lack of appropriate education for many.

If you have time left, try other searches in the field of medicine, for instance with different dates, different branches of medicine, or in a particular place. Try to work out what the results tell you about the way the medical profession and health care developed in Britain.

Suggestions: Try putting London or Edinburgh in 'Place' box for the early modern search; or use a longer time period, for example 1500–1750; try selecting 'born' in the 'Event' box and entering France or Italy in 'Place'.