

Don't Trust Me! I'm a Doctor.

With hindsight the best piece of advice one could give to someone living in the 17th or 18th century would be: **don't fall ill!** And if you do happen to become sick, do not seek the help of anyone in the medical profession, since the treatments they might offer would certainly make you feel even worse and more than likely considerably shorten your life.

For centuries, indeed since the ancient Greeks, medical knowledge and the treatment of diseases, had been dominated by a belief in the so-called four humours. These were blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. The theory was that the body was filled with these four fluids or humours, and it was an imbalance, or lack of, or excess of any of them which could cause ill health. Treatments were therefore devised, the intention of which was to restore the balance between these four fluids. The astonishing thing is that belief in this hogwash endured for so long, that no-one seemed to question whether the treatments were actually effective, when all too often the evidence pointed in the opposite direction.

The last few days in the life of King Charles II vividly and gruesomely illustrates what "rebalancing the humours" meant for the sufferer. One could almost feel sorry for the whoring, gambling monarch who squandered the nation's wealth on a dissolute play-boy life style. On February 1st 1685 early in the morning the king collapsed with a seizure or stroke. Luckily (?) one of the royal physicians, aptly named Dr. King, was close by and was able to administer a prompt treatment. In such a case the first line of action recommended to restore the correct humour was almost always bleeding. Dr. King immediately drew sixteen ounces of blood from King Charles' arm. Over the next few days more physicians attended the King. They probably stood at his bedside, muttering to each other in Latin and trying to give the impression they knew what they were doing. Since his situation seemed to be growing worse they recommended several more bloodlettings, including cutting open a vein in his neck. No improvement. So a more drastic form of humour rebalancing was tried. This involved the King being administered some nasty potion or enema to violently purge the bad humours from his body. His situation deteriorated, so an even more unpleasant humour treatment was applied. His head was shaved and a poisonous, blistering ointment was rubbed into the top of his head, the belief being that this would draw off the bad humours through the top of his skull. After four days of this state of the art medical care the King was close to death and the doctors admitted defeat. They had done their best! The King died on February 6th. Belief in the four humours and the kind of treatments described remained part of mainstream western medicine until well into the early 1800s.

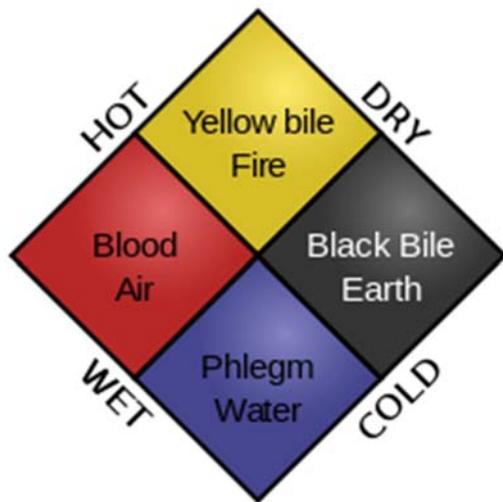
Even at less exalted levels such treatments were readily available, if perhaps not from such highly qualified (!) practitioners. After all, anyone with a sharp knife, a bowl and a strong stomach could do a little blood letting. Such a one was the New Mill farmer and diarist, Arthur Jessop (1682-1751). Since the nearest "qualified" doctor at the time was probably at Halifax, Arthur was regularly called on by locals to exercise his medical knowledge. Generally this meant that the sicker the patient the more blood Arthur would draw. He would record this in his diary, and then, almost nonchalantly, would note a few days later that his patient had died.

There were a few dissenting voices who questioned and indeed rejected the whole philosophy of the four humours and the treatments it prescribed. Most notable of these was the herbalist Nicholas Culpeper (1616-1654). He catalogued and explored the medicinal potential of hundreds of herbs. He questioned traditional methods and explored new solutions for ill health through herbal remedies. He spotted for example the medical

potential of the foxglove (*digitalis*). We can justifiably say that with Culpeper began the evolution of modern pharmaceuticals, many of which are, of course, based on herbs.

And can we say with any confidence that the medical world today has entirely shaken off the four humours mind set? Many will remember the widespread and irresponsible prescribing of valium (“mothers’-little-helper”) as a cure-all in the 1970s, the 20th century version of bloodletting, which has left thousands permanently addicted. And today there is the controversy linked to the present use of statins. One branch of the medical profession insists that it would benefit everyone over 40 to be taking a daily dose, whilst another group insists equally vociferously that they do more harm than good. Many on the receiving end complain of unpleasant and unacceptable side effects. More’s the pity that King Charles is not here to give them a try.

The Four Humours



Grave of Arthur Jessop, Lydgate Chapel, New Mill

