# Curious cures exhibition reveals medieval medical practices



A fascinating new exhibition at Cambridge University Library is set to shed light on the eccentric and often bizarre medical practices of the Middle Ages. Titled "Curious Cures: Medicine In The Medieval World," the exhibition showcases a collection of medieval manuscripts that provide insight into the treatments and beliefs of medical practitioners from this bygone era.

The exhibition, which opens to the public on March 29 and will run until December 6, features more than 180 manuscripts, primarily dating back to the 14th and 15th centuries. It is part of a project to digitise and catalog these historical documents, which include compendiums of cures, alchemical texts, and guides to healthy living. Dr James Freeman, the curator of the exhibition, highlighted that these manuscripts unveil the "strange and surprising things that physicians and healers tried to make their patients well again," according to The Independent.

Among the particularly intriguing remedies presented in the exhibition is one suggesting that women could address infertility by using a concoction of weasel testicles and chickweed, known as mouse-ear. This treatment involves burning the ingredients together, grinding them into a paste, and creating pessaries that are to be placed in the cervix for three days, after which intercourse is recommended in order to conceive. The manuscript elaborates that "after these three days however, she should have intercourse with a man and she should conceive without delay."

In his reflections on medieval medicine, Dr Freeman contended that it should not be simplistically viewed as mere superstition or a series of blind trials. Speaking to The Guardian, he emphasised that "medieval people thought about things" and possessed a "very elaborate and sophisticated system of thought" regarding medical practice. This system was deeply informed by the cultural beliefs surrounding the cosmos and the natural world, including the influential concepts of the four humours and sympathetic medicine, which suggested that certain animal parts could be beneficial for treating human ailments.

The exhibition also highlights the diversity of medical practitioners in the medieval period. It showcases that medicine was not solely the domain of educated physicians; it was practiced by monks, friars, surgeons, apprentices, apothecaries, herbalists, and midwives, as well as by individuals caring for their own families. Historical manuscripts will be on display alongside surgical diagrams, illustrations of figures such as "Vein Man" and "Zodiac Man," and some of the earliest anatomical images found in Western Europe.

Another notable manuscript featured in the exhibition belonged to Elizabeth of York, Queen of England. This richly illustrated book contains "Regime Du Corps," an influential health guide originally composed in French for a noblewoman. Dr Freeman noted that while the health regime was likely accessible only to the wealthy, the medical recipes included later in the manuscript often utilised the same common herbs and spices found in the broader medical literature of the time. He remarked, “There is even a recipe for a laxative powder, which makes you wonder about Elizabeth and Henry’s diet!”

"Curious Cures" aims to provide visitors with a comprehensive understanding of medieval medical beliefs and practices. The exhibition encourages an exploration of the interconnectedness of medicine and astrology, as well as insights into how death was perceived in that era. One striking exhibit includes a brass rubbing of a plaque commissioned by Sir Ralph Hamsterley, depicting his skeleton and requesting prayers for his soul, which illustrates attitudes toward mortality in medieval society.

The free exhibition requires pre-booking and seeks to educate the public about the complexities and intricacies of medical history, bringing to life the concepts and practices that characterised healing in the Middle Ages.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RaoYYwq2MaY> - This video supports the content of the 'Curious Cures: Medicine in the Medieval World' exhibition at Cambridge University Library, discussing medieval medical practices through an interview with Dr. James Freeman, the exhibition curator.
* <https://www.festival.cam.ac.uk/events/exhibition-curious-cures-medicine-medieval-world> - This webpage provides details about the 'Curious Cures' exhibition, including its duration, booking requirements, and highlights of the medieval medical manuscripts on display.
* <https://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/exhibitioncuriouscures> - This page offers information about the exhibition schedule, the necessity of booking, and the variety of historical manuscripts showcased in the exhibition.
* <https://www.noahwire.com> - Though not directly referenced in the provided text, Noah Wire Services is noted as the source of the article, potentially containing additional details about the exhibition.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regimen_Sanitatis_Salernitanum> - This could provide general information about medieval health guides like 'Regime Du Corps' mentioned in the article, though it is not directly linked to Elizabeth of York's manuscript.
* <https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/medieval-medical-manuscripts> - This page from the British Library discusses medieval medical manuscripts, which provides contextual background for the kind of materials featured in the 'Curious Cures' exhibition.