Medieval Women’s Medicine

**Midwives: Practitioners of Women’s Medicine**

During the Middle Ages, women’s medicine was often practiced by fellow women. These women were usually older women with much experience, but with no formal education or titles. Only men at this time received formal education, and it was considered improper for them to practice women’s medicine. Even when men started to study women’s medicine later in the Middle Ages, the midwives still did most of the practicing. This includes aiding in the birthing process, and care before and after childbirth. Many midwives were persecuted in the late Medieval period for witchcraft, but these women were the ones who knew the most about women’s medicine.

**Pregnancy and Childbirth**

As we know, pregnancy and childbirth are very difficult processes. This was especially true for women during the Middle Ages. Then there were not epidurals or other things to make the pain lessen. During pregnancy, women often have cravings. However, the Trotula suggests that giving in to a pregnant woman’s cravings could cause her to miscarry. The Trotula also suggests that sneezing could cause a woman to miscarry. Aside from the possibility of miscarriage, the Trotula also mentions herbal remedies for flatulence and swollen feet, which are both very common complaints of pregnant women. During childbirth there are often complications. The Trotula suggests different remedies for the different situations that might arise. According to the text, these complications could include a dead fetus, the exit from the womb being too small, the mother being too fat, or the child coming out feet first. Women having trouble with labor were often bathed in warm water containing things like barley and flaxseed. At this point, many midwives would also try to invoke sneezing. If the child was not coming out head first, the midwife was supposed to moisten her hands with the same bath concoction and turn the child. Fumigation of the woman’s vagina was also considered good. They also also understood that the afterbirth must also leave the body, or it could cause complications in health.

**Caesarean Section**

Julius Caesar was thought to have been born through a Caesarean section, hence its name. These surgeries are normally performed with forceps when vaginal birthing becomes impossible, such as when the mother dies, mainly because the procedure was seen as fatal. Most C-sections were performed after the mother had already died during the Middle Ages. These weren’t very often mentioned in medical texts. It was seen as wrong to cut the flesh, especially that of a woman. At different times during the Middle Ages, children born of C-sections were either viewed as versions of the antichrist, or as miracles. The first mention of a Caesarean section appears in a cuneiform tablet from Mesopotamia, second millennium B.C., where a boy was described as being “pulled out from the womb”. The first woman reported to live through this procedure was the wife of a 15th century farmer, who pulled the baby out himself.

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**The Trotula**

The Trotula was one of the most important texts on women’s medicine and gynecology in the Middle Ages. It is a compilation of three separate texts. It was first written in Italy in the 12th century. The Trotula was translated into English in 2002 by Monica Helen Green, who is considered to be one of the leading researchers of women’s medicine in the Middle Ages.

**Detection of Virginity**

Virginity was a very important concept during this time, especially when applied to women. Men and women when virgins were considered to be of a whole different gender before having sex for the first time. Female virgins were viewed almost as if they were otherworldly, even their urine was believed to have magical/medicinal properties, and it sparkled. People during this time believed that the hymen was a piece of skin in the bladder and the vagina, which suggests that they also believed that the vagina and the urethra were the same thing. They believed that you had to “break” this skin while having sex if the woman was a virgin, and that she was not a virgin if this did not “break”. They also believed that manners showers watered to wash or not a woman was a virgin. A virgin would show shame and modesty.

**Restoring the Appearance of Virginity**

Women who were not virgins, or who had a normal hymen, often went to physicians to make it seem like they were virgins on their wedding nights. Some solutions to these problems involve geese organs filled with blood, leeches placed inside the vagina, powdered natron placed inside of the vagina, ground oak placed inside the vagina, a new linen cloth dipped in a mixture of eggs, water, and herbs placed inside the vagina, or sometimes even a reconstructive surgery to “sew the hymen back together”. Often these involve creating a bit of blood on the sheets.

**Menstruation**

Women during the Middle Ages experienced less periods as we do, due to hard work, malnutrition, and earlier menopause. However these women still had to deal with periods, and did not have tampons and pads like we do. However they did have the same choices we do, either absorb the blood within, or catch it as it comes out. Women often used cotton strips to stifle their flow. These were held in special kinds on underwear and girdles. It is also believed that moss could have been used, as it was used to cover wounds. Some even suggest cloth covered in honey and oils used as a proto-tampon, to soak up the blood inside of the vagina. Some even just wore red clothing during their periods. Menstrual blood was seen as poisonous and bad at this time, so it was very important for women to hide this from the public. However, fertility was very important as well, so it was seen as a rite of passage for a woman to get her period.