Changes In Medicine During The Renaissance

The word renaissance means 'rebirth' in French, and indeed Europe was reborn during the Renaissance. In this dynamic time the creative mind of man, which for centuries had been dark and stagnant with blind religion and ignorant superstition, awakened from its deep coma and, in the bright dawn of a new age, began to create and implement new and fascinating ideas. As the wave of mental clarity swept the continent, people began to see the world in countless original ways, broadening horizons in fields such as medicine and science. The Renaissance was the beginning of the great transformation from the archaic medicine of the Middle Ages to the stupendous technology of the modern world.

The practice of medicine changed noticeably during the sixteenth century. For example, during the Middle Ages, remedies were almost unbelievably absurd. The abracadabra treatment required that the patient write abracadabra eleven times, losing a letter from the end every time. At each line, the grip of the illness would lessen (Inglis 79-80). Also, exorcism was another remedy; often it was the only cure available. This process relied on people's faith in God because it represented a summoning of God ('Medicine' 54). However, during the Renaissance, medicine developed new cures. For instance, Paracelsus worked with the treatment of syphilis with an unguentum of mercury (Bellamy 120-122). Also, Pare showed the accepted treatment of gunshot wounds to be inadequate. The standard practice was to cauterize the wounds with boiling oil and treacle, but almost by accident Pare discovered that mixture of egg yolk, oil of roses, and turpentine worked much better. Afterwards he never cauterized gunshot wounds again (Inglis 84-86). The practice of medicine definitely was transformed during the Renaissance, but this is not the sole area of transformation.

The regulation and organization of medicine changed considerably. For example, pharmacopoeias attempted to standardize the composition and dosage of medications. The first one appeared in Nuremberg in 1546; the London Pharmacopoeia, established circa 1620, was the first time the principle was applied nationwide (Bellamy 127). Also, guilds shifted often. In the fourth year of his reign, James I incorporated the apothecaries and grocers into the same company. However, nine years later he separated the two professions and furthermore decreed that no grocer could also keep and apothecary's shop. Likewise, surgeons' guilds also underwent a change. Edward IV and Henry VII had organized the barbers but left the surgeons with absolutely no organization; therefore, Henry VIII put the surgeons and barbers in the same company, even though he forbade barbers' surgery and surgeons' shaving practices (Simpson 61-62). The regulation and organization of medicine certainly transformed, but other areas were also affected.

Attitudes about medicine changed dramatically during the Renaissance. For example, before Pare surgery was of little account; surgeons had much the same status as chiropractors today. Pare raised the status of that branch of medicine by showing the accepted treatment of gunshot wounds as totally inadequate (Inglis 84-86). Also, the church was a very influential force in Europe until the Renaissance ('Medicine' 57). Sickness was regarded as sent by God to punish wickedness and to try faith (Grell 101-102) or sent by the Devil with God's permission (Grell 104). God also was responsible for healing the body, although the sick should use all means to become well, of which medicine was one. This was acceptable because God often acted

through second causes (Grell 101-102). However, the College of Physicians symbolized medicine's lessening association with the church. It appeared just before the physicians' break with the priesthood and excluded anyone in the holy orders (Simpson 59-60). Attitudes about medicine changed very dramatically, but one more area of medicine was transformed as well.

The knowledge behind medicine was transformed immensely during the Renaissance. For instance, during the Middle Ages popular belief was that worms caused disease (Rubin 47). However, by the year 1500 Girolamo Fracastero had postulated that contagious diseases were transmitted through minute particles by direct contact, through infected objects, or via air (Bellamy 116). Also, William Harvey discovered the concept of circulation of blood. HIs findings were validated by Marcello Malpighi in 1661 (Bellamy 128). Similarly, much intellectual progress occurred in the field of anatomy (Wear xi). Galen, born circa 130 A.D. (Inglis 35), was a great anatomist who wrote down his own observations (Inglis 37) and also classified and systemized Hippocrates' works. Eventually he came to be regarded as an indisputable source (Bellamy 42). However, Andreas Vesalius, a central figure of Renaissance medicine (Inglis 81-83), wrote the first comprehensive book on anatomy (Bellamy 127) pointing out Galen mistakes in anatomy (Inglis 81-83). Vesalius really made medicine a science (Bellamy 127). The knowledge behind medicine certainly changed greatly during the Renaissance.

The Renaissance was the beginning of the great transformation from the archaic medicine of the Middle Ages to the technology of the modern world. That period was the beginning of the change, and mankind has certainly progressed amazingly since that time. However, new frontiers, both physical and mental, are still being discovered, and society is struggling with new ideas also. Perhaps, centuries into the future, the twentieth century might come to be regarded as a second Renaissance.