‘Every man his own doctor’¹:
Physicians and the Printing Boom

Physicians’ emphasis on the importance of their specialized knowledge, so crucial in differentiating themselves from their competition, was threatened by the increasing availability of printed medical works in English. Such works were often written by non-physicians whose aim was to disseminate basic medical knowledge to all readers. Worse still for physicians was the fact that the audience for such vernacular works was growing along with literacy, and writers were responding by using simple language so that everyone from an upper-class audience to the commonest reader had access to medical information.²

The increasing availability of medical publications in English was a potential problem for physicians, as these threatened both the value and mystique of the formal education upon which physicians differentiated themselves. Physicians were divided in their opinion about the appropriateness of publishing in the vernacular, particularly in the beginning of the century. Eventually, many physicians came to capitalize on the opportunities provided by the printing press and used it as a means of highlighting the deficiencies of their competitors and articulating their unique vision of health care.

The publications penned by physicians have been described by Lucinda Beier as a physician-led advertising campaign against irregular healers. Beier has argued that the medical profession launched a concerted and conscious effort to bolster their status through a campaign with a twofold aim: to create a favorable image for licensed healers and to destroy the reputation and practices of unlicensed healers.³ William Eamon has made a similar suggestion but pointed out that physicians only learned the value of impugning their competition after being forced to defend themselves in print from the onslaught of empirics who attacked physicians first.⁴ The antagonistic nature of physicians’ writing, often defensive in tone and just as frequently offensively aggressive against their critics, needs to be placed in the context
of a growing sense of professional calling and pride, one that Eamon has noted was felt not just in England, but throughout Europe. This chapter draws upon these theories to demonstrate that publications in the vernacular by physicians were a crucial component in differentiating themselves in the public mind from other types of healers in order to bolster their status and to assume greater authority in public-health issues.

Physicians had reason to be wary of their place in a society in which medical knowledge was becoming more readily available to healers and patients alike, and in which learned counsel was being valued less in the emerging commercial world than empirical experience. How then did the profession survive, and in the eighteenth century thrive? By publishing medical works in the vernacular, a practice to which many physicians were vehemently opposed earlier in the century, they were able to attack other types of healers while simultaneously establishing their credentials in the field of healthcare.

The flood of books that streamed from the presses began in the sixteenth century and by the seventeenth century had opened up a burgeoning market for self-help manuals in medicine, the crafts, and the domestic arts. Competition now took on an entirely new dimension with the flourishing of the market for printed medical texts in English. For centuries, anatomy had been the province of surgeons and physicians, trained to read and write in Latin, but publications in the vernacular threatened to change this.

The printing press provided a great opportunity for empirics to advertise their cures and to write health guides and medical treatises on any imaginable subject. In contrast with learned medical theory, works by empirics were accessible and practical. Rarely were the medical-theoretical underpinnings spelled out or disputed, because unlike physicians, empirics lacked motivation to establish intellectual authority over their patients or their competition. Vernacular works also challenged the very type of care regimen advocated by physicians by giving remedies for specific ailments. Empirical publications generally did not concern themselves with the spiritual aspects of healing or with preventative medicine. They were focused on remedies for specific ailments. This was in stark opposition to what physicians envisioned as proper health care: instead of advocating sound advice on the ideal way to organize one’s life and habits, such publications attempted to alter the conditions under which people lived through bad advice and powerful remedies.

Vernacular works also challenged the exclusivity of medical knowledge by claiming the public had a right to medical information that learned practitioners were deliberately keeping from them: