CHAPTER 17

LITERARY AND DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE FOR
LAY MEDICAL PRACTICE IN THE ROMAN REPUBLIC
AND EMPIRE

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The majority of surviving ancient medical literature was written by medi-
cal practitioners and produced for the purpose of ensuring the effective
diagnosis and treatment of their patients, suggesting an audience of
medical professionals ranging from instructors to students. This has led
historians to concentrate on the professional medical practitioner and
their theories, methods and practices, rather than on lay medical practi-
tioners, or even patients themselves. This chapter seeks to redress this
imbalance, and examine the ancient literary and documentary evidence
for lay medical theories, methods and practices in the Roman Republic
and Empire in an attempt to reconstruct the experiences of lay medical
practitioners and their patients. The Roman agricultural treatises of Cato,
Varro and Columella, papyri and ostraca from Egypt, and tablets from
Britain are investigated, and it is established that the individual’s per-
sonal acquisition of knowledge and expertise, not only from medical pro-
fessionals and works of medical literature, but also from family members
and friends, and through trial and error, was considered fundamental to
domestic medical practice.

1 Introduction

The majority of ancient medical literature that survives from antiquity seems
to have been written by medical practitioners and produced for the purpose of

Roman Lay Medical Practice

ensuring the effective diagnosis and treatment of their patients, suggesting an audience of medical professionals ranging from instructors to students.¹ This partiality has led scholars of ancient medicine to concentrate on the professional medical practitioner (the physician, the surgeon, the midwife etc.) and their theories, methods and practices, rather than on lay medical practitioners, or even patients themselves. This is despite the fact that the very same literary evidence attests to the co-existence of a thriving tradition of lay medical theory, method and practice, although admittedly the components of this tradition are much more difficult to reconstruct with any certainty.²

Arthur Kleinman put forward a model indicating that the health care systems in any society can be said to comprise of three distinct sectors: popular, folk, and professional.³ In this model, the practitioners of popular medicine have no particular interest or expertise in healthcare beyond the norm; the practitioners of folk medicine are specialists in their fields but lack official or professional standing; and, finally, the practitioners of professional medicine are acknowledged as specialists and often have some sort of official status or institutional affiliation. While this model is certainly useful as a starting point, such definitive distinctions are not necessarily appropriate to healthcare in antiquity, where there was such a wide range of expertise that it was not necessarily possible to draw a firm distinction between the professional and the layman. This holds true for both the upper echelons of society, where members of the social elite were actively encouraged to acquire medical knowledge sufficient to enable them to hire the most appropriate professional medical practitioner, and the lower, where individuals might have had to resort to treating themselves, their family members, friends, and even acquaintances.⁴

Is it possible to reconstruct any aspect of lay medical theory, method and practice with any certainty? While lay medical theories and methods can be provisionally reconstructed from works of ancient medical literature that claim to present them, such as the Hippocratic treatise Affections, it has to be

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¹ On medical literature, see Martínez, V. M. and Senseny, M. F. ‘The professional and his books: special libraries in the ancient world’, in König, J. et al. (2013). Ancient Libraries, 401–17, esp. 406, 407–10. There are, of course, notable exceptions to the general rule, such as Celsus’ De Medicina or Pliny the Elder’s Historia Naturalis.

² Efforts are being made to address this. See most recently, for example, Flemming, R. (2007). ‘Women, writing and medicine in the classical world’, CQ 57.1, 257–79, and in response Parker, H. N. (2012). ‘Galen and the girls: Sources for women medical writers revisited’, CQ 62.1, 359–86.
