

History assignment

The rise of the biomedical monopoly

By Tom O'Brien

Herbal medicine has a long history dating back to Rig Veda 2500 BC. Since then it has spread and has been practiced across borders, traditions and timelines. Yet today when we think about medicine, we usually refer to biomedicine or modern medicine. Biomedicine is associated with doctors in white coats, hospitals, scientific laboratories, academic journals, waiting lists, expensive treatments, and more recently with disillusionment. In the UK more people die in hospitals from medical errors or adverse effects from treatments and medications than die on the roads.¹ Illich was the first to theorize the harmful effects resulting from actions taken by medical professionals as the iatrogenic effect.² Yet despite the limitations of biomedicine and its potentially harmful effects, it continues to maintain a monopoly in all areas of health care today.

In this paper I will explore the rise of this medical monopoly during nineteenth century America and examine its impact on the development of herbal medicine.

American medicine during the nineteenth century was highly pluralistic. Regular medicine shared the stage with a wide number of competing medical systems including botanical medicine, eclecticism and homeopathy. Regular doctors did not exert any dominance over alternative practitioners. In the early nineteenth century, various sections of the American population began to question regular medicine and its drastic methods such as bleeding, leeching and the use of strong drugs. By 1850 regular medicine was on the decline and faced many challenges from other heterodox medical systems e.g., botanical medicine and homeopathy. Heterodox systems were often based on vitalism, the view that the body cannot be understood simply in terms of chemical and physical processes.³

Regular medical doctors began to form societies and attempted to reduce competition by creating a fee system. The serious economic threat posed by the popularity of homeopathy and botanical medicine was one of the major factors that prompted regular physicians to establish the American Medical Association (AMA) in 1847. The AMA's first course of action was to lobby the government for strict licensing laws that would limit the number of doctors practicing medicine. Banning any form of medicine not practiced by the regulars was one sure way to limit the number of practicing physicians. The AMA earned the power to regulate and standardize medical schools.⁴ New systems of licensing doctors and certifying medical institutions ensured that alternative medical systems were marginalized further.

Despite the rise of the AMA botanic medicine continued to appeal to farmers and the urban working class. Alternative medical systems continued to be a source of dissent and resistance to the dominance of regular medicine in the health care area. Samuel Thomson (1769-1843) a New Hampshire farmer founded the popular Thomsonian movement, which used a system with over 70 medicinal plants and herbs to treat a range of illnesses. Thomson's system became an integral part of the Popular Health Movement, which helped to strengthen its social and cultural influence.⁵ However with time new challenges emerged for the Thomsonian movement as internal divisions and conflicts weakened its power to challenge the growing power of the AMA.

In the late nineteenth century, regular medicine was transformed into a commodity, a process that reflected the rise of industrial capitalism. A new alliance emerged between elite practitioners from prestigious universities and the emergent industrial class that gave regular medicine the political, economic and ideological advantage over rival medical systems.⁶ With the emergence of scientific medicine or biomedicine and its emphasis on pathogens as the primary cause of disease, corporate and government elites began to neglect the social origins of disease. Medicine under capitalism was about restoring workers back to a level of functional health.⁷

The corporate class found it necessary to exert control over an increasingly restless population. Along with education, medicine became another vehicle to filter their views of reality to the masses. Medicine also adopted a functional role on behalf of the state of pacifying social dissent and resolving the contradictions of a capitalist society.⁸ It could be argued that biomedicine maintains this role today with its excessive use of prescription drugs like Valium (Sedative), Methadone (opiate) and Zimovane (Sleeping tablet) in economically disadvantaged communities like Finglas.

To consolidate its monopoly the AMA, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation commissioned the Flexner Report on medical education in America. It recommended that only regular medical schools should be funded. According to Ehrenreich⁹ the Flexner report changed drastically the socioeconomic, ethnic and gender composition of the regular medical profession. It also forced some heterodox schools (e.g. osteopathic and chiropractic) to amalgamate with regular medicine so as to survive in some form. Finally it contributed to the creation of a medical paradigm that views that body as a series of parts that can be repaired or replaced.

Conclusion

It is clear from this review that medicine, as we understand it today, gained its status and monopoly through a series of social, cultural and historical events. This monopoly is maintained today through the practice of evidence-based medicine and the powerful status of the medical profession. Herbal medicine in Ireland today is a promising revolution bubbling beneath the surface and working quietly behind the scenes preparing itself for the change that is already here.

¹ McTaggart, L, What Doctors Don't Tell You.

² Illich, I, Medical Nemesis

³ Baer

⁴ Baer, H.A., Biomedicine and Alternative Healing Systems in America

⁵ Brown, 1979

⁶ Berliner, 1982

⁷ ibid

⁸ Baer, p.5

⁹ Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, 1978