



HISTORIC WESTVILLE

Georgia's 1850's Living History Museum

1850 Medicine

(first in a series of six articles)

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In order to understand medicine in the 19th century, you must forget many things that you now take for granted.

There were no such things as bacteria or viruses causing disease. Illness was known to be caused by an imbalance in your humours, brought on by intemperate living or by the influence of miasma, the evil smelling gases from the woods or city sewers.

This prevailing theory of health and disease, the theory of Humours, was centuries old and dated far back to Hippocrates. According to this belief, the body contained four "humours" or fluids that influenced the health and well-being of an individual. An imbalance of these was thought to be the actual and direct cause of all diseases. The humours themselves were blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, and were specifically connected with certain organs.

Blood was thought to be made in and was influential over the liver. It was a hot, sweet fluid, responsible for nourishing the body to give it strength and color. The physician could diagnose a problem by feeling the pulse, an important clue to your health. Is it strong or weak, too fast or too slow?

If the pulse was abnormally fast or strong, the physician knew that too much blood flowed through the veins. This was considered the cause of most fevers, headaches, and bad attitudes, along with many other physical difficulties. It was remedied by bleeding or cupping the patient.

An extraordinarily slow or weak pulse meant that this sanguine humour must be strengthened, and a "warm" diet or medicines such as Tincture of Capsicum (or red pepper) would be prescribed.

The brain and lungs were the origin of phlegm or pituita which was believed to be a cold and moist humour. Phlegm nourished and moistened the body and its organs. Too much or too little would result in ailments such as colic, indigestion and boils. Those individuals with a sluggish or dull personality were thought to have a "phlegmatic temperament" and would be treated for an overabundance of this fluid by purging or causing the patient to vomit or sweat profusely.

Other problems, such as heartburn and constipation, for instance, were brought on by an imbalance in one's choler, or yellow bile. Choler was made in the gallbladder and was considered hot, dry and bitter. It purportedly helped the body's natural heat while also serving to expel wastes. Like the other humours, choler was believed to be influenced by one's temperament and an imbalance could cause or be caused by quick or excessive anger.

The final humour, black bile, also went by the name "melancholy". It was thought to be cold, dry, thick, black and sour. It was thought to come from the spleen and was

out of balance with the other 3 humours anytime depression or other mental illnesses were present. Cancers, gangrene or mortification along with other illnesses were also the result of having an improper amount of black bile in the body.

The humoral theory was not the only idea of what caused disease in the 19th century. Another theory, very popular in the early 1800's and carried into the middle of the century by the country's older physicians, was that of Doctor Benjamin Rush, physician, politician, and signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Rush's theory was that all disease was one disease and came from an over stimulation of the nerves and blood. He believed that "heroic medicine" was the cure for over stimulation, which meant bleeding, purging and vomiting to restore a natural balance.

Even though we have advanced far beyond the belief in humors, the humoral theory still remains, to a small extent, in modern medical language. Physicians use the terms humoral immunity and humoral regulation to refer to substances such as antibiotics and hormones that circulate throughout the body.