A SURVEY OF EAST ANGLIAN MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS 1500-1640

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It has for some time been recommended that an accurate evaluation of medical practice in the early modern period should be approached by means of an intensive regional survey.¹ However medical practitioners have not yet received the kind of attention that is increasingly being paid to other professional groups. The standard biographical listings are dependent upon the more formalised and accessible sources, and are therefore biased in favour of the academically qualified physician.² The pioneering work of Raach demonstrated that even such physicians were more numerous and less concentrated in larger provincial centres in the early seventeenth century than had been assumed, but Raach’s work did not take into account other classes of practitioner, and accepted academically qualified physicians at their own valuation. In 1977, a survey was begun at the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine in Oxford, of medical practice and practitioners in London and East Anglia over the period 1500-1640. It was decided not to apply any criterion of selection based on education, or attempts to estimate effectiveness in practice. For the purposes of the survey an individual is included as a practitioner if he or she was regarded by contemporaries as seriously engaged in the practice of medicine, surgery or midwifery. This is not to deny the existence at this time as at all other times of exploitative or irresponsible quacks, but it does avoid dependence upon the allegations of contemporary interest groups, or, for example, any equation of ‘unlicensed’ with ‘unskilled.’

Our preliminary findings indicate that the practitioner qualified in medicine or arts was far more common than even Raach supposed, but that the burden of practice was borne not by this self-assertive group but by the barber-surgeons and apothecaries traditionally entrenched in towns, and, in the countryside, by clergy, surgeons, midwives and unlicensed practitioners in general, including cunning men and women. Tentative minimum ratios of practitioners (excluding midwives) per head of population for London, Norwich, and East Anglia in the late sixteenth century are in the region of 1:400. Other aspects on which the survey throws light are the activities of ‘stranger’ practitioners, the employment, casual and otherwise, of men and women by civic authorities to care for the poor, and the role of the University of Cambridge in supplying practitioners to surrounding areas. The survey is intended as both a quantitative and a qualitative study.³

The basis of the survey is a biographical index consisting at present of c. 10,000 cards relating principally to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, Suffolk, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and London. The survey has now been extended to include Essex, and in some areas is to be taken past 1700, but it will continue to be most intensive for the period 1550-1640. Among the published sources which have been used are: the standard biographical lists for universities and other institutions; indexes to wills and inventories; lists of freemen and apprenticeship indentures; records of stranger communities. Unpublished sources incorporated so
far include: records of visitations; proceedings of civil courts; ecclesiastical licences. It is hoped ultimately to issue biographical listings in computerised form.

In spite of the high incidence of practitioners already estimated for both towns and rural areas, we regard the totals so far arrived at as minimum figures. Our survey will be complemented by others, notably Mr. P. J. Wallis and Dr. T. D. Whittet's computer index of apothecaries. We would greatly welcome exchanges of information with other scholars. Inquiries or information should be directed to: Margaret Pelling, Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine, 47 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE.

Notes


2. See however C. H. Talbot and E. A. Hammond, The Medical Practitioners in Medieval England: A Biographical Register (London, 1965), for the period before 1518. The authors adopted the broad definition of practitioner here advocated, but were more hampered by limitations of evidence: see their Introduction. This register was modelled on Wickersheimer's Dictionnaire Biographique des Médecins en France au Moyen Age (1936).
