Mapping key areas of Medicine Roman to Late Middle Ages

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|  | Roman | The Early Middle Ages AD 400-1000 | Later Middle Ages 1000-1400 |
| Ideas on the Causes of Disease | There was a range of explanations of the causes of disease and illness. The main theory was that the Humours within the body were out of balance (Phlegm, Blood, Yellow Bile and Black Bile). They also believed that illness could have supernatural causes, and be caused by the Gods or a curse. Finally they avoided places with bad smells like bogs, as they thought that this could also make you ill. | In the chaos of the collapse of the Roman Empire there was a loss of knowledge and less medically educated people. This meant that detailed knowledge of Humoural Theory disappeared, although the general notion was retained. The predominant theory was supernatural, that the Christian God was punishing you for your or humankind’s sins or testing you or that it was the work of the devil. The Anglo-Saxons also believed that elves and spirits, the devil’s helpers shot invisible arrows, known as elf-shot, to cause everyday illnesses such as headaches. There was some notion of the idea of bad air. | Doctors believed that people became sick when their humours were out of balance. Supernatural explanations were also still very common, with illness being seem as a punishment or trial by God or work of the devil or witches. There was also still the notion of bad air. |
| Treatment | Humoural treatments were particularly common in town, where there was a presence of doctors. This would mainly involve either bleeding or purging or the idea of using diet and environment to redress the balance, eg cooling food like cucumber and a cool environment for excess blood and red wine and warm fires for too much phlegm. This was based on the law of opposites. Most illnesses were treated with herbal remedies, passed down the generations by the father of the household.Romans would also often pray to Salus or other Gods and give offerings.In Roman Britain there was also the impact preexisting Celtic approaches. The Driuds made great use of plants and herbs, which the Romans adopted. | Most people used herbal remedies, many of which were effective, which were passed down the generations by the mother of the household.  People also used prayer, wore charms or amulets or went on holy pilgrimages, particularly for long term health issues.  There was some use of Humoural treatments, particularly bleeding and purging, but the limited number of doctors in this period meant there was a dip in this approach. | Most people used herbal remedies, many of which were effective.  People also used prayer, wore charms or amulets or went on holy pilgrimages, particularly for long term health issues.  Physicians used bleeding and purging to rebalance the humours, and diet and environment, to a lesser extent, to rebalance them. They used urine charts to diagnose and zodiac charts to decide when to treat certain illnesses, according to astronomy and astrology. Physicians also gave advice on how to stay well, such as light meals, gentle exercise, building your house in an area with fresh air and relaxing. |
| Public Health | The Romans built water systems with aqueducts, pipes, water fountains, public toilets and brick sewage pipes. This was because they had the government, administrative systems, money and manpower, in soldiers and slaves to develop these. However there were problems with these systems such as sharing sponges and shortages of water. Also these systems were only in the towns, not the countryside. | Invading tribes destroyed or neglected public health systems. Public Health systems gradually dropped without the engineering skills of the Roman Army. Water for drinking and cooking was collected from rivers, contaminated from the cesspits. Animals were a problem, animals were butchered in public areas and roamed the streets. Leaders were far more focused on warring with other tribes to focus on developing or maintaining towns. Many towns were abandoned, with people shifting to nearby countryside. Towns were filthy. | Governments, mainly local authorities made some efforts to keep towns clean, such as a few public latrines being provided, legislation and clearing rubbish away, paying for raker teams to clear away dung. Some water systems were provided by the charity of certain individuals paying for the project. Some houses were built with stone lined cesspits, less likely to leak. However, they didn’t have the means to enforce regulations. Kings were mainly concerned with other issues like keeping law and order or wars. |