

Towards a Historical Archaeology of Health and Illness

Introduction

Historical archaeologists are well positioned to contribute to a greater understanding of the ways in which people dealt with their illness in the past given access to health and hygiene artifacts. Yet the archaeology of health or indeed, an archaeology of medicine remains under-utilized from the wider discipline. The lived experience of being sick and strategies of wellness are ever present in archaeological assemblages from toothbrushes and hypodermic needles, to patent medicines. Exploring contemporary and historical medical scholarship as well as medical anthropological concepts, this poster introduces a health framework to historical archaeological approaches to the past.

Q: What can the material remains of medical and hygiene paraphernalia, recovered archaeologically, tell about people's past lived experiences of illness and disease?



A: Indicates not only did people suffer from ailments but a desire to manage their illness and disease.

While generally, it cannot be known for certain if in fact any one person experienced symptoms associated with remedies recovered, evidence can show the need to consume the product was a worthwhile endeavor for whatever reason(s) prompted. As such, the possibilities of symptoms can also be considered.

Why a Health Framework?

A health framework applied here is one that utilizes

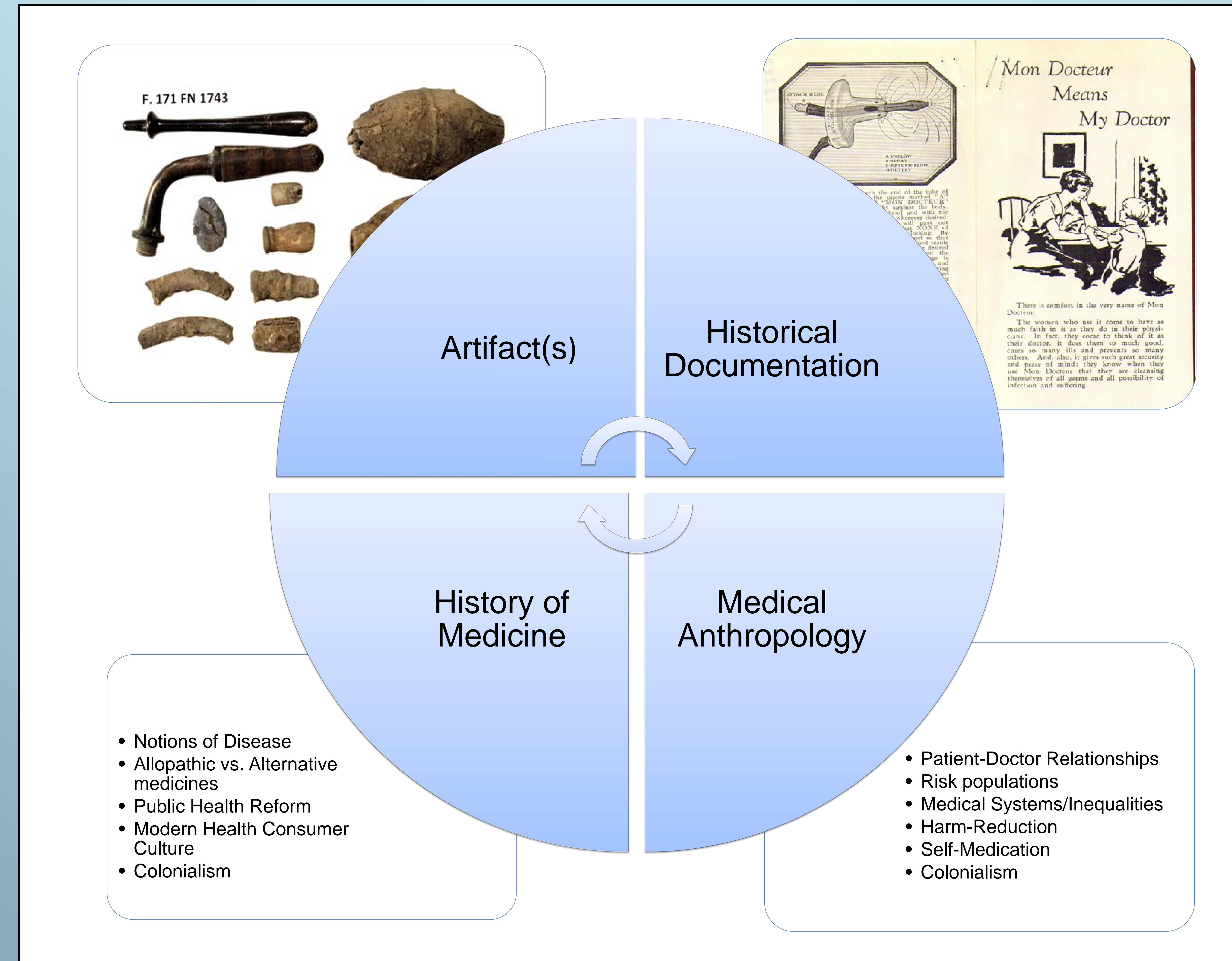
- 1) both modern and contemporary health sources and
- 2) considers medical anthropological literature in order to better study the time frame.
- 3) Drawing upon current public health and epidemiological literature on health practices offers a direct historical approach from which understanding societal constructs of health today can then be understood how their genesis developed in the relative "unknown" past.

Why Medical Anthropology?

Medical anthropological scholarship can enlighten archaeologists' interpretations when addressing health, hygiene, and medical material culture, offering such insights as:

- medical knowledge and production,
- the function of medicine and public health,
- agency and self awareness in health-related behaviors or beliefs, and
- the meaning-making process of experiencing illness (Lupton 2012:12; Whyte et al. 2002:23-90).

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Literature cited

Lupton, D. 2012. *Medicine as Culture: Illness, Disease, and the Body*. SAGE Publications Ltd., Sydney.

Whyte, S. R., S. V.D. Geest, and A. Hardon . 2002. *Social Lives of Medicine*. Cambridge University Press.

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Conclusions

- By using collections that yielded medicine and hygiene artifacts with contemporary public health and epidemiological research, history of medicine scholarship, and medical anthropological principles, a much more complex social behavior than has been noted may be addressed.
- Such studies provide historians of medicine in addition to anthropological, archaeological, public health, and epidemiological scholars with an interconnected understanding of health practices.
- Archaeology applied in this way affords insight into historical social constructions of wellbeing like that of etiologic beliefs about diseases.
- Used in this way, a historical archaeology of health and illness has the capability to inform not just the past but the present, too.

Resources

Edited volumes to check out:
Practitioners, Practices, and Patients: New Approaches to Medical Archaeology and Anthropology
Edited by Patricia Anne Baker and Gillian Carr

To learn more about where to access information about historical medical guides, textbooks, articles, and print media check out:

- American Medical Association Historical Health Fraud and Alternative Medicine Collection
- U.S. National Library of Medicine
- Medical Heritage Library

For Historical Archaeologists: strike up a conversation with those medical anthropologists and historians of medicine!

Further information

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