

**Study Guide #11, 11/22-11/24:  
Public Health Politics and Thanksgiving**

There are no readings for this week, and therefore no weekly writing assignment.

We have now completed the series of lectures and readings about colonial and 19th century medicine. In them we examined a medical system that was scarcely recognizable: the therapeutic system used different remedies with different standards of efficacy, hospitals and medical schools were places of ill-repute, and the profession needed to struggle for every scrap of recognition and respect. You should feel comfortable giving thoughtful answers to the following questions:

- What is the nature of efficacy? Did bloodletting or other colonial remedies work? What different answers can be given to this question? When is it useful to evaluate past remedies from our modern perspective, and when is it useful to evaluate them from past perspectives?
- Why do therapeutic systems change over time? What is the role of innovation, skepticism, and changing patterns of disease?
- Why was the medical profession so weak in the 19th century? What created the crises in medical schools and hospitals? What are the most important determinants of professional status and power? Why did the situation begin to improve in the late 19th century?
- How did doctors understand people who were different from themselves? What was the role of theories that asserted the superiority of white men over women and minorities? Was mental illness seen as a disease that required treatment, or as misbehavior that required isolation and confinement?

In the lectures last week and this week, and in the final five lectures after vacation, we will trace the emergence of our modern medical system. We will examine how therapeutics, institutions, patient-doctor relationships, and the profession all took on the form they have today.

Start paying more attention to medical and public health issues that appear in the news. When you read or hear about health care reform in Massachusetts, federal plans to cut Medicaid, Chinese efforts to contain Bird Flu, or modern studies of hypnotism, think about them historically. Are these problems new challenges? If so, why have they emerged and become relevant now? Or are these familiar, enduring issues, things that medicine has been struggling with for centuries? How does your new knowledge of the history of medicine and public health help you understand modern health problems?

Finally, if you celebrate Thanksgiving, remember the early lectures about the diseases of Indians and colonists. Are the annual protests in Plymouth, which accuse Thanksgiving of being a celebration of genocide, justified? What legacy should these devastating epidemics have in our cultural memory?