

Media Release



Kill or Cure? New State Library exhibition comes with a warning ... **not for the faint-hearted!**

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From the knife-wielding barber-doctor to crackpot cures, mysteries of the wandering womb, to blood-curdling surgical procedures pre-anaesthesia, the State Library's immersive new exhibition takes visitors behind the curtain of Western medicine's macabre history.

Kill or Cure? A Taste of Medicine, opening this Saturday 30 July, admits 'day patients' into a hospital-like setting with 10 treatment rooms. Here, you'll experience the dubious, dangerous and often deadly techniques used to diagnose and treat the sick and diseased from 15th to the 19th century.

According to curator Elise Edmonds: "The exhibition may be a little unsettling for some; we wanted to evoke the creeping dread of death and disease of the past. It makes you grateful for the scientific breakthroughs of modern medicine."

The exhibition draws from over 60 rare books in the State Library's collection to reveal some of the powerful and enduring ideas from Western medicine that have since been debunked — from the influence of astrology and healing chants and prayers to more barbaric practices. Then there are the hero moments, of medical advances that we take for granted today.

Take a seat in the waiting area where ABC health/science reporter Tegan Taylor explains the four humours (from Ancient Greece through to the 19th century) which underpinned all medical thinking in leading a balanced, healthy life.

"If the body became sick or diseased, it was understood that their humours were out of balance (blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm)," says Elise. "This often resulted in a visit to the barber-surgeon for some bloodletting or leeching."

Inside our treatment rooms you'll meet the bloodletting man in 3D and learn how astrology was used to determine the right time to open a vein. According to a 1497 book, bloodletting for melancholy involved opening a haemorrhoidal vein!

Wander the corridors and enter the 'Pharmacy' to hear quack doctors spruiking dangerous cures from behind the interactive wall. Consult a DIY medical manual from 1677 to learn how to diagnose yourself based on moles on your body!

Inside the 'Operating Theatre' you'll see instruments that will make your skin crawl. The operating table 'installation' brings to life the trauma of surgery pre-anaesthesia.

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Elise says, “the best surgeons were those who could wield their instruments, insert, remove, and sew up in minutes, due to the extreme levels of pain being endured.”

Some of the strangest thinking in the 16th and 17th centuries was reserved for women. In the ‘Obstetrics’ room hear bemusing theories about the wandering womb, virgin’s disease and mysteries of menstruation.

What’s more ...

- Find out what herbs were used for in ‘General medicine’. For example, Betony helped to treat a fear of the dark.
- See the weird remedies James Cook tested to fight scurvy. All he needed was lemon!
- Peer through the Georgian-era peep holes for insights into the spread of syphilis.
- Learn about the warped fears of wise women (‘witches’) of the 16th and 17th century.

Kill or Cure? was two years in the making [conceived and developed during the lockdowns] and is by far the Library’s most ambitious exhibition installation to date.

“We’re using the gallery as ‘theatre’, where a series of story-worlds have been staged for people to walk around in. We want to draw a direct line between patients of the past and you, the visitor — it’s all about emotional evocation,” says Sabrina Organo, the exhibition’s Creative Producer.

Kill or Cure? A Taste of Medicine is a free exhibition at the State Library of NSW, from 30 July 2022 to 22 January 2023. www.sl.nsw.gov.au/killorcure

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