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# Health Care In America: A History



## Synopsis

In *Health Care in America*, historian John C. Burnham describes changes over four centuries of medicine and public health in America. Beginning with seventeenth-century concerns over personal and neighborhood illnesses, Burnham concludes with the arrival of a new epoch in American medicine and health care at the turn of the twenty-first century. From the 1600s through the 1990s, Americans turned to a variety of healers, practices, and institutions in their efforts to prevent and survive epidemics of smallpox, yellow fever, cholera, influenza, polio, and AIDS. Health care workers in all periods attended births and deaths and cared for people who had injuries, disabilities, and chronic diseases. Drawing on primary sources, classic scholarship, and a vast body of recent literature in the history of medicine and public health, Burnham finds that traditional healing, care, and medicine dominated the United States until the late nineteenth century, when antiseptic/aseptic surgery and germ theory initiated an intellectual, social, and technical transformation. He divides the age of modern medicine into several eras: physiological medicine (1910s–1930s), antibiotics (1930s–1950s), technology (1950s–1960s), environmental medicine (1970s–1980s), and, beginning around 1990, genetic medicine. The cumulating developments in each era led to today's radically altered doctor-patient relationship and the insistent questions that swirl around the financial cost of health care. Burnham's sweeping narrative makes sense of medical practice, medical research, and human frailties and foibles, opening the door to a new understanding of our current concerns.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A synthetic work that enlightens a complex historical subject, Health Care in America is logical, coherent, and very well-written. There are many books that touch upon the American health care system, but none that provide a comprehensive overview that covers the span of American history. This book, which represents the thinking of a mature and distinguished intellectual, will be of interest to scholars, students, and laypeople in history, medicine, policy studies, and the social sciences."

(Gerald N. Grob, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, author of *Aging Bones: A Short History of Osteoporosis*) "Burnham writes for a broad audience, and the prose is easily accessible to undergraduates." (Choice) "Captivating and enjoyable." (Stanford Magazine) "Burnham's thematic analysis of more than four hundred years of history is clearly presented, and his sweeping survey is illustrated with detailed stories and evocative images. Health Care in America is grand narrative in its finest form." "This book will be most useful for advanced undergraduates, particularly students interested in the health-related disciplines, as well as graduate students interested in the long history of medicine. Burnham provides a great starting point for scholars interested in the broad meaning of medicine and the questions associated with health and healing." (Journal of the History of Medicine) "Burnham accomplishes exactly what the general synthesis should: providing the reader with all of the basic, essential information, while simultaneously provoking questions addressed in more specialized texts. On that score, Burnham performs quite admirably, and, as such, I heartily recommend *Health Care in America*." (British Journal for the History of Science) "Burnham's volume will rightfully find a wide readership among historians and lay readers alike, and this ambitious, thoughtful, sweeping synthesis of the history of American health care is a welcome addition to the historiography of medicine in the United States." (Isis) "... [Burnham] concentrates not so much on medical, surgical, or even administrative innovations, but on the social, political, religious, and economic reactions to these innovations. By thus seeing the development of American medicine in this broad context, he brings into sharp relief the interaction between the health care enterprise and those who either cannot afford health care or have inadequate access to it." (Watermark)

John C. Burnham is a research professor of history at the Ohio State University, where he is also an associated scholar in the Medical Heritage Center. His most recent books include *What Is Medical History?* and *Accident Prone: A History of Technology, Psychology, and Misfits of the Machine Age*.

A masterpiece written by one of the few true scholars still researching & writing in Fifth Column

America. Not infected by the current ignorance that claims nothing written is 100% free of personal opinion or judgement (bias) therefore let my Progressive Bias run free of the "evidence" Sewer logic it is. No different than an insurgent group of Sewer surgeons who decide that surgery cannot be performed 100% germ free therefore they will do it in a sewer. Burnham goes where the facts & evidence lead him & conclude what logic seems to support based on the facts. If you wish to read a valuable social history of American health & Medicine I strongly recommend this book. It is a much needed update to Duffy's work.

everything as expected

I wasn't happy with the information in the book. I have read a great deal about the history of medicine. This book prints a rosy picture of the great American Health Care System. I unfortunately think there is more to the story which is untold in this book

The late John C. Burnham (1929-2017) was 86 when this fine synthesis of American medical history was published, and it is easy for a sympathetic reader to appreciate why he wrote it in what critics have called a "triumphalist" mode. Burnham personally witnessed enough medical advances to fill half the book. Though Burnham was the master of a vast body of primary and secondary scholarship, he wrote the book in a lucid (if not flashy) style, which is able, along with his fine examples and apt illustrations, to take a general reader through nearly 500 pages of text. Burnham is careful and temperate, but he does have opinions, even putting in something of a good word for bloodletting and referring to medical marijuana as

"oxymoronic."

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