

David W Fletcher, April 2002

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JOHN HARLEY WARNER'S *THE THERAPEUTIC PERSPECTIVE:
MEDICAL PRACTICE, KNOWLEDGE, AND IDENTITY IN AMERICA, 1820-1885*¹

In this reviewer's opinion, Warner writes for the medical professional or the historian who is interested in the evolution of antebellum medicine. In this sense, he appeals to the specialist rather than to a general audience, so much so that *The Therapeutic Perspective* is not for the uninitiated in historical medical terminology. The reader who is unaware of the discourse of the history of American medicine might learn more about antebellum medicine from another source.

Warner writes to show how medical therapeutics in America changed in two fundamental ways between 1820 and 1880. First, knowledge based on experimental science and characterized by universal diagnostic categories replaced proper behavior and the principle of specificity—"the notion that treatment had to be matched to the idiosyncratic characteristics of individual patients and their environments"—as the basis of the physician's professional identity. Second, new strategies that depersonalized disease, minimized differences among patients, and derived from experimental science supplanted traditional medical practices that sought to treat the symptoms of sick persons individually and did so in light of commonly held beliefs about disease. Both nineteenth-century developments showed an overall trend in therapeutic practice away from specificity toward universality (1).

¹Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986. Paperback Reprint Edition; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997. 365 Pages, New Preface to the Paperback Edition; Endnotes; Brief on Sources for the History of Therapeutics; Index.

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In his treatment of this transformation, Warner focuses on “the framework that ordered the physician’s practice . . . therapeutic epistemology, theory, and principle; actual medical treatment; and professional identity” (4). He shows the lack of any consistent pattern of evolution, as he takes a look at regional variations and particularly the professional medical centers in Boston, Cincinnati, and New Orleans. In order to do this, Warner uses private practice case books and hospital case histories to get at therapeutic behavior or practice which best reflects therapeutic theory or principle. He notes the general conservatism of physicians, especially in regard to therapeutic practice like venesection, even when pressured to change by patients themselves, the French empiricists, and sectarian practitioners like homeopaths, eclectics, and Thomsonians. Regardless, dramatic change did occur, so that by the 1860s a notable decline in “cures” like depleting therapies and mineral cathartics gave way to stimulating treatments, palliation and care, and drug intervention. Similarly, the overall goal of therapy changed for physicians—“from restoring the balance that represented the individual patient’s natural condition to correcting the body’s abnormal state by bringing it back in line with fixed norms” (5).

Warner’s main point is highlighted in the summary that follows his lengthy comparison of the Massachusetts General Hospital and the Commercial Hospital of Cincinnati (with lots of statistics from a large pool of case studies, see 102-161). He notes a decline in the “extensive description of the individual patient’s history and condition” by both physicians and hospitals. He indicates that “standardized measurements” often inscribed on “standardized forms”

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superseded the earlier, personal approach to diagnosis and treatment. He concludes, “This convergence in therapeutic practice and vision reflected a broader shift from individualization in medical therapeutics to universalism, a universalism that in the 1870s and 1880s began to be associated with and in part define a new therapeutic epistemology and a new ideology of professional identity” (161). To the novice, so much seems axiomatic and could have been said in less space and in plainer language. To the medical specialist who is familiar with the issues Werner discusses and, no doubt, to those who awarded *The Therapeutic Perspective* the Welch Medal of the American Association for the History of Medicine (1991), Werner says a great deal more.