



# Health Care in America: A History

*John C. Burnham*

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## **Health Care in America: A History** John C. Burnham

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.

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