HISTORY OF CONTRACEPTION

Sex, medicine and the Tudors

Lesley Smith

Background
For many years, social historians were inclined to dismiss studying the private lives of medieval and Tudor women, believing there was too little information available from the medical practitioners of the day compounded by the extreme levels of illiteracy amongst women who were unable to record their own experiences. There were also assumptions that modesty would prevent much information being passed in any form. In fact, lots of assumptions were absolutely wrong.

After 26 years of studying Tudor women, with the last six being particularly focused on sexuality, contraception and experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, I am constantly surprised about how much information actually exists. Detailed first-hand documents frequently show bright, practical middle-class women with new ideas, carrying out tasks relating to medicine that one might think were only in the licence of men. Contraception seems to have been widely known about and practised, along with some fine midwifery standards. Many women enjoyed fulfilling sex lives and an understanding of herbal medicine that would defeat most of us today.

Elizabethan medicine
All mainstream Elizabethan medicine was based on the Ancients, particularly Hippocrates and Galen. Medical training was very theoretical. University life for the doctor at the top of his profession would involve most tutorials being given in Greek or Latin. Humanists were encouraged to speak only ancient tongues in debate and, indeed, general conversation.

The humours of the body were thought to be the absolute understanding of how the body worked in conjunction with the stars and the will of God. Individuals were believed to be, by nature, a combination of wet or dry, hot or cold, and that there were outward and physical signs for a medical practitioner to observe in the person to aid in diagnoses and treatment. Balance of the humours was everything. The body was thought to be made up of four main fluxes: blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm. An imbalance could lead to illness and individuals had a propensity to particular weaknesses and strengths according to their birth charts. The soul and condition of the person’s conscience was also a major factor in healing.

The Ancients, birth charts, observation and God. It really was the ‘it doesn’t pay to offend anybody’ school of thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no doubt sorcery (not to be confused with alchemy) and the whiff of magic played a part too, thinking. There is no
and June were considered good months to conceive under the Zodiac sign of Gemini. The scales, rather than twins, suggested the ovaries. Combine this with a man born under the twitching tail sign of Scorpio and hopes were high. Wives lit candles at midnight, and cast flowers or urinated in fields after dashing three times around its perimeter. Intercourse should be by preference with the man on top, for it was believed if the woman sat astride then the sperm might not be able to reach inside the womb. There were also grave concerns that intercourse from more unusual angles might result in the child being damaged. This was a time when people also believed that if a spider frightened a pregnant woman then the child might be born black and hairy. This should not be such a surprise for a time when unicorns were widely believed to exist!

The second Tudor monarch, Henry VIII, swept away the Pope and married six women, but believed in transubstantiation and the full Catholic power of sacrament and intercession. Elizabeth, the last Tudor monarch, was the true Renaissance Prince. Although thinking and challenging new ideas were encouraged, there was a long way to go before they could even begin to understand conception and childbirth.

Future articles
This article has attempted to give some background information; future articles will address specific issues. Readers interested in finding out more for themselves should consult some of the publications listed in the Bibliography, which the author has found to be invaluable in researching this fascinating area of medicine.

The next article in this series will deal with contraception, and give details of a medical experiment carried out with the help of a gynaecologist. Be prepared to be very surprised!

Bibliography
1 Trotula (primary source). Green, Monica H (ed.) (translated from the Latin). Pennsylvania, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2001. Good root background piece from a Salerno-based female professor of medicine of the 11th or 12th century. This translation has a preface that argues input from more than one individual. We do know it was widely referred to by physicians in Europe. Covers gynaecology, obstetrics, health and hygiene.
3 Banck’s Herbal. Period housewife’s version of Good Housekeeping. A useful handbook for women of the period for a number of reasons, including medical.

About the Author
Lesley Smith is an Elizabethan historian, currently studying for the degree of MPhil in the History of Medicine at Birmingham University Medical School. She has appeared in 12 television programmes including Tony Robinson’s The Worst Jobs in History, and is currently working on an eight-part 1-hour major series on the Private Lives of Women. Lesley is well known as a public speaker and regularly startles her audiences when appearing in full Elizabethan costume and the dead-white authentic make-up of the 1580s (Figure 1). Lesley’s humorous and powerful delivery is encouraging many health professionals to find out more about the root of their profession.