

"Cupping, leeching and the lancet - a history of blood-letting".

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Bleeding by cupping, leeching and the lancet are all extremely ancient forms of blood letting. References to all three can be found in Egyptian hieroglyphs dating from about 1500 BC. Bleeding was advocated by Hippocrates and later by Galen as important treatment in 'balancing the humours'. The practice reached a peak in Europe and North America in the 18th and early 19th centuries. With the coming of the Enlightenment a more rational approach to disease developed and from the 1860s blood-letting for most conditions began to decline.

A variety of materials were used to make cupping equipment including gourds, horn, bamboo, glass, pewter and rubber. A range of cupping devices were developed. Cupping could be 'dry' where the skin was intact or 'wet' when cupping was preceded by scarification.

Leeching was so common that the word 'leech' became the slang term for a doctor. Hundreds of thousands were collected from ponds for use by the medical profession.

The lancet was commonly used for the direct opening of a vein. Alternatively scarifiers, with up to ten blades, could be used to produce generalised bleeding from the skin.

In veterinary practice the bleeding of horses, usually with a fleam and blood stick, continued for much longer and only died out during the First World War.

Many of the artefacts associated with bleeding, such as classical leech jars and bleeding bowls, have become collectors' items.

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