

History 3840F
Microscopes and Amputation Saws: A History of Medicine in 10 Objects
Fall 2026

Instructor: **Professor Shelley McKellar**

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Office: **Department of History, Lawson Hall 2227**

Office Hours: **Tuesdays 2:30 to 4:30 p.m.**

This is a **draft** outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

Course Description

Using 10 objects as entry points into the history of medicine, this course explores the changes and continuities in Western medical knowledge and practice since the 18th century. New and old medical treatments, different medical theories, professional authority, socio-cultural expectations, and issues of power, class, race, gender will be explored.

Prerequisite(s):

None. This is a 3-hour weekly in-person class meeting.

Course Syllabus

Content & Expectations

This is a course in the history of modern Western medicine that focuses on medical **KNOWLEDGE and PRACTICE**. This course aims to highlight the changes and continuities in Western medicine, identifying key individuals, ideas, treatments, structures, and contexts that reinforced or shifted the knowledge and practice of medicine, predominantly from the 18th century to present day. In this course, we will ask (and trace): What specific medical practices have changed? How did certain medical practices reinforce or disrupt medical knowledge at various periods of time? Who and what (individuals, technology, structures) were involved in these changes?

Each week's topic will start with a medical object, which will serve as an entry point to explore a broader theme or aspect in the history of medicine. In this course, we will spotlight 10 medical objects and tackle 10 distinct areas of medical history, covering such topics as the germ theory revolution, the history of surgery, and more. Through weekly lectures and discussion, we will consider different historical interpretations and contrasting points of view and examine numerous methods and theories used by historians to gather and evaluate historical evidence. Issues of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality will be discussed alongside themes of individual agency, professional authority, consumerism, and more. Students will engage with a variety of primary sources throughout this course and be exposed to material culture study.

This is a mixed lecture and breakout sessions course. Each week, there will be a lecture and small group break-out discussions. There will be a hands-on component in the form of a

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Medical Artifact Collection workshop for which students will work with historical medical objects. This workshop session is scheduled during class time, so please note that the workshop location differs from our regular classroom location.

Who can take this course?

This course is open to all students. Students in history, science, social sciences, health sciences, or arts and humanities are welcome. Students do not need a background in science, medicine, or history to take this course.

Course-Level Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students shall be able:

- To differentiate the changes and continuities (historical shifts and patterns) in medical knowledge and practice over time, and how individual agency, professional authority, socio-cultural expectations, and issues of power, class, race, and gender may influence this;
- To explain key medical developments, such as the adoption of the germ theory and the introduction of new medical technologies and treatments;
- To recognize that medical knowledge and practice are shaped by time and place;
- To analyze critically various source materials – primary and secondary sources – from which to understand the history of medicine;
- To formulate and communicate an effective argument, which demonstrates strong writing and analytical skills.

Refer to history outcomes and expectations for 3rd year students at:

https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/expectations_outcomes.html

Methods of Evaluation

- Quiz #1 15 %
Due date: Oct 6 (in class)
- Quiz #2 25 %
Due date: Nov 17 (in class)
- Research Essay: What An Object Reveals (2500 words) 30 %
Due date: 11:59 p.m. on Nov 24; *Flexible “no-late-penalty” until 11:59 p.m. on Nov 26
Given this built-in flexibility, requests for further consideration will generally be denied
(as per [Western’s Senate’s Policy on Academic Consideration](#)).
- Object Presentation: Lightning Talk (5 min) 10 %
Due date: Dec 1 and Dec 8 (in class)

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- Group Break-out Session Activities 20 %

Due date: In-class activity – 6 sessions with 6 separate grades (check schedule below);

*Flexible that the lowest grade will be dropped, and the highest 5 grades will count;

Given this built-in flexibility, requests for further consideration will generally be denied.

(as per [Western's Senate's Policy on Academic Consideration](#)).

The Group Break-out Sessions are designed as a group peer-to-peer learning activity. In these sessions, students earn grades for demonstrating aspects of “thinking and practicing as an historian.**” The group will interrogate a set of primary documents (circulated before class), with specific CONTENT and ANALYSIS questions (assigned in class) for group discussion, of which salient points will be submitted in writing at the end of class..*

- Reflective Writing Assignment: Insight into my Learning (500-750 words) 2 %
for “**Bonus Marks**” (not required)

Due date: 11:59 p.m. on Dec 8; *Flexible until 11:59 p.m. on Dec 9 (end of term)

Assignments -- Assignment handouts are posted on the OWL Brightspace course site.

Submitting Your Course Work -- Students will submit digital copies of assignments via the OWL Brightspace course site. A **digital copy** of all assignments is required for grading. As per [Western Senate Academic Policy](#), “the last day of scheduled classes in any course will be the last day on which course assignments will be accepted for credit in a course”.

Late Penalties -- Penalty for late assignments is 2% each day (including Saturday and Sunday) after the due date, to a maximum of 10% late penalty applied to the assignment. As per [Western Senate Academic Policy](#), course work cannot be submitted after the last day of scheduled classes in the term. As per [Western Senate Academic Policy](#), academic consideration for late or make-up submissions may be denied since there is already flexibility built into the submission framework. To be fair to all students in this class, anyone seeking course work extensions and/or a late penalty exemption must request this through Academic Advising/Advisors.

Course Materials

- Jacalyn Duffin, *History of Medicine: A Scandalously Short Introduction*, 3rd edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. (\$43.00 Ebook; \$56.05 Paperback at [campus bookstore](#)) [Online copy available via Western Libraries](#)
- Group Break-out Session primary documents – available on OWL Brightspace course site

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Course Schedule and Readings

Week	Date	Topic	Duffin Textbook Chapters
1	15 Sep	Introduction - Why Objects as an Entry Point into the History of Medicine? Microscope (Object #1) - History of Pathology & Disease Theories	Chapter 1 Chapter 4
2	22 Sep	Artificial Arm (Object #2) - History of the Body <i>Group Break-out Session – Art & the Body (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i>	Chapter 2, Chapter 3
3	29 Sep	Penicillin (Object #3) - History of Pharmacology <i>Group Break-out Session – Penicillin Narratives (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i>	Chapter 5
4	6 Oct	Scarificator (Object #4) – History of Bloodletting Quiz #1 (in-class) -- Students responsible for material covered & assigned during classes of Sep 15, Sep 22, Sep 29	Chapter 8
	13 Oct	Fall Reading Week – NO CLASS MEETING	None
5	20 Oct	Mystery Artifact (Object #5) WORKSHOP in the Medical Artifact Collection *** workshop session held in LwH 2262 – the Teaching Classroom connected to the Collection Storage Space <i>No pens, no food, no drinks are allowed</i>	None
6	27 Oct	Thermometer (Object #6) - History of Measurement & Diagnosis <i>Group Break-out Session – The function and value of Fluoroscopy (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i>	Chapter 9 (object #5, #6)
7	3 Nov	X-ray (Object #7) - History of Hospitals <i>Group Break-out Session – Toronto General Hospital 1913 & 1930 (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i>	Chapter 9 (object #5, #6)

8	10 Nov	Amputation Saw (Object #8) - History of Surgery <i>Group Break-out Session – Lobotomy in the News (read digitized material <u>BEFORE</u> class)</i>	Chapter 10
9	17 Nov	The DSM or Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Object #9) - History of Psychiatry Quiz #2 -- Students responsible for material covered & assigned during class of Oct 6, Oct 20, Oct 27, Nov 3, Nov 10	Chapter 12
10	24 Nov	Obstetric Forceps (Object #10) - History of Childbirth <i>Group Break-out Session – The “Forceps” Debate (read digitized material <u>BEFORE</u> class)</i> Essay Assignment due	Chapter 11, Chapter 13
11	1 Dec	Object Presentations: Lightning Talks – Part 1	None
12	8 Dec	Object Presentations: Lightning Talks – Part 2 Reflective Writing Assignment due for “Bonus Marks” (not required)	None

Additional Statements:

You may not make any use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in this course. Any use of such tools for assignments in this course may be considered a form of academic misconduct.

Please review the Department of History’s shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.