

Introduction: Therapeutics and the Transformation of American Medicine

BETWEEN THE 1820s and the 1880s medical therapeutics in America was fundamentally altered. Traditional medical practices, founded on assumptions about disease shared by doctor and patient and oriented toward visibly altering the symptoms of sick individuals, began to be supplanted by strategies grounded in experimental science that objectified disease while minimizing differences among patients. Concurrently the bases of physicians' professional identity were also transformed. Through the mid-nineteenth century professional identity was based on proper behavior and on a medical theory that stressed the principle of specificity, the notion that treatment had to be matched to the idiosyncratic characteristics of individual patients and their environments. During the last third of the century a new conception of professional identity, defined by allegiance to knowledge generated and validated by experimental science and characterized by universalized diagnostic and therapeutic categories, was clearly in ascendance.

I have elected to use the study of medical therapeutics as a context in which to evaluate these changes in professional identity, scientific knowledge, and medical practice. This is, then, a therapeutic perspective on the culture of orthodox medicine in America and its transformation between the 1820s and 1880s. As the core of medical activity, therapeutics was central to the professional image and legitimacy of physicians. Moreover, therapeutics, regarded as both a cognitive system and a set of social practices, is a useful indicator of the changing real and perceived roles of scientific knowledge in medicine. A study of therapeutic change, its determinants, and its meaning is thus a singularly productive means of assessing physicians' professional values and their perceptions of what constituted proper sources of knowledge.