

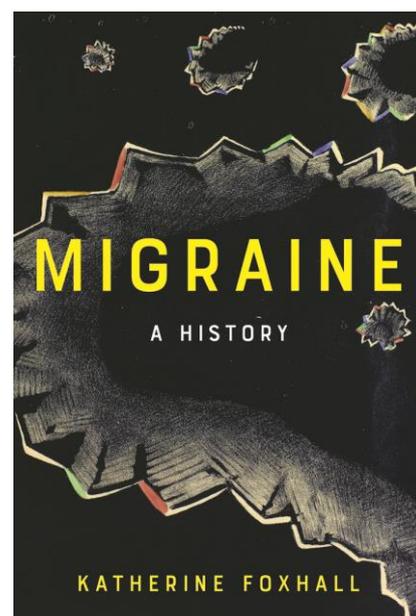
Migraine: A History

Katherine Foxhall

"Katherine Foxhall is one of the most illuminating young historians of science and medicine writing today. Her history of migraine... is an enthralling story. It is a must-read for migraine sufferers as well as their physicians and friends. I couldn't put it down."

— Prof. Joanna Bourke, author of *The Story of Pain: From Prayers to Painkillers*

Dr Katherine Foxhall, historian and author of a new book on the history of migraine, tells us more about the fascinating story behind the third most common disease in the world.



What is your book about?

My book covers a two thousand year history of how physicians and people who experience migraine have talked about, treated and explained migraine's causes and symptoms. We go all the way from the Roman period, when the famous physician Galen talked of a one-sided head pain caused by ascending vapours within the body, through medieval bloodletting and early modern herbal remedies, to the emergence of modern neurology and medicines, and contemporary ideas about gender.

Why do we need a history of migraine?

Migraine is the third most common disease in the world. It affects 1 in 7 of the global population, and is responsible for millions of lost days each year. But remarkably, until now, we have known very little about its history. My argument in the book is that we cannot understand our own common ideas about migraine - including its identity as both an acute and chronic disease, and how it has come to be associated primarily with women - unless we understand how social, cultural and medical ideas have changed and developed over time. It is a really important time for such a history to be told, as we are currently seeing some significant new breakthroughs in preventive migraine treatments.

So, how long have we known about migraine?

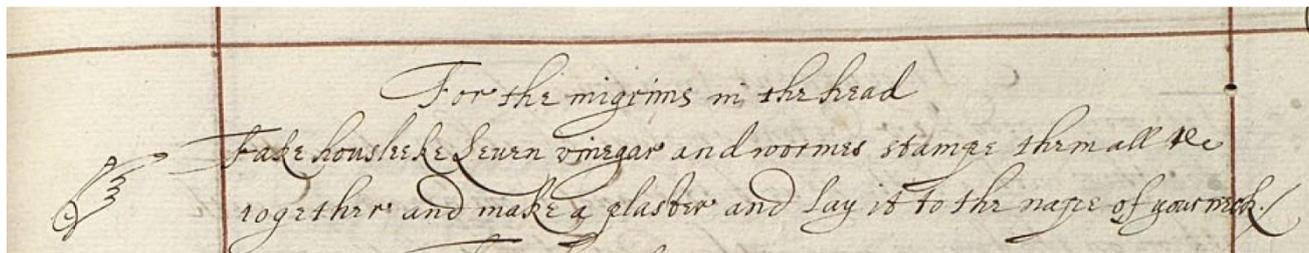
One of the reasons migraine's history is so fascinating is because we have evidence going back two thousand years for a disease known as migraine. In classical medicine the word *hemicrania* described a pain affecting half the head, and caused by humoral disturbances. Most importantly, for hundreds of years it was presented as a very serious disease. In the twelfth century, the abbess Hildegard of Bingen, explained that the reason the pain of migraine only affected half the head was because its strength was such that a person would not be able to endure it, if it filled the whole head.

What were some of the most surprising things you found?

My favourite sources were the many recipes I found in household remedy collections from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These handwritten manuscripts - often family heirlooms that were handed down between generations - give a real sense of a common body of popular knowledge (much of it held and shared by women) that could be adapted to local and seasonal conditions or to individual needs and budgets. We find treatments for both acute attacks and a more chronic condition that required long-term management - this evidence tells us a lot about how people in the early modern period understood the disease.

I was also fascinated by the way migraine played a part in nineteenth and twentieth-century concerns about the rise of nervous diseases in relation to modernity, and the significance of discussions about migraine's

possible relationship with diseases such as insanity and epilepsy. As well as putting migraine uncomfortably close to some eugenic theories, it is these ideas that form the background to common misperceptions that migraine stems from a person's personality, a failure to cope with the pressures of life, and its association primarily with women.



Could these old treatments have actually worked?

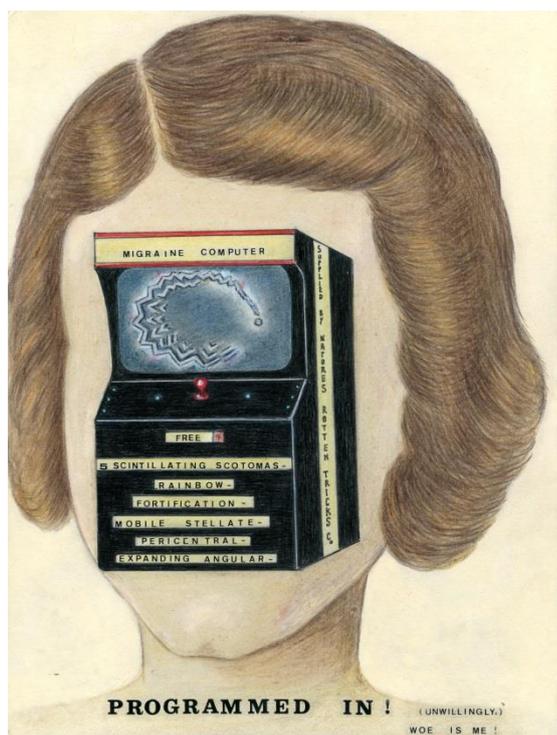
It's tempting to be dismissive of past knowledge that seems strange to us - using earthworms as a paste on the head is a good example - but when we look at the properties of many of the herbal ingredients used right from classical times into the nineteenth century, many of them were either very aromatic (giving a sense of airs penetrating into the head) or made medicines with either a sedative or pain-relieving effect. This approach to treatment continues to be relevant today. It is also quite possible that bloodletting would have given a sense of relief from a pounding throbbing pain.

Is it true that trepanning used to be a common treatment for migraine?

No! This is one of the most popular ideas about ancient migraine treatment. In fact, there is no evidence at all that trepanning - the practice of drilling a hole in the skull - was used for migraine. This idea seems to have been the product of early twentieth-century speculation by physicians fascinated with the potential of neurosurgery. In fact, the only evidence directly linking surgical drilling in the skull and migraine comes from the 1930s, around the time of the use of frontal lobotomy.

What message do you hope people will take away from your book?

At a global level, scientific migraine research is under-funded, the disease is often under-diagnosed and under-treated, and it is often seen as an 'excuse', rather than a real problem that demands our attention. For me, the most important conclusion from this book is that this problem of legitimacy is a relatively recent development, because in fact migraine *had* been seen as a very serious disorder for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. I hope that, by showing its rich and fascinating long history, my book can contribute to a current shift in perception about a disease that has such a disabling effect on so many people, and about which so much remains to be discovered.



If you would like to order copies of *Migraine: A History*, are interested in interviewing Katherine, or would like her to speak at an event, please contact:

Gary Hall
Oxford Publicity Partnership
01327 357770
gary.hall@oppuk.co.uk