

Strange Blood

The Rise and Fall of Lamb Blood Transfusion in 19th Century Medicine and Beyond

In the mid-1870s, the experimental therapy of lamb blood transfusion spread like an epidemic across Europe and the USA. Doctors tried it as a cure for tuberculosis, pellagra and anemia; proposed it as a means to reanimate seemingly dead soldiers on the battlefield. It was a contested therapy because it meant crossing boundaries and challenging taboos. Was the transfusion of lamb blood into desperately sick humans really defensible? The book takes the reader on a journey into hospital wards and lunatic asylums, physiological laboratories and 19th century wars. It presents a fascinating story of medical knowledge, ambitions and concerns – a story that provides lessons for current debates on the morality of medical experimentation and care.

1. Why did you choose this topic? The story of lamb blood transfusion is a colourful one, full of drama, human ambition and suffering. I realized this a few years ago when I studied the history of blood transfusion in Sweden and found that transfusions involving lamb had been performed on hundreds of patients across Europe and the USA in the late 19th century. That arose my curiosity: how and why was this done, how did the patients react – and did it work? 2. What new perspectives does your book offer? Based on unique sources in six languages, the book combines a sociological perspective with historical analysis. It takes the reader on a journey into hospital wards and lunatic asylums, physiological laboratories and 19th century battlefields. It gives vivid accounts of sickbed encounters and laboratory experiments, discusses the heated arguments for and against lamb blood transfusion, and links individual ambitions and professional concerns to wider social and political issues. 3. What makes your topic relevant for current research debates? The study is about crossing boundaries and challenging taboos. It shows how medical knowledge, ethics and expertise are linked to problems of social inequality, national pride and military needs. It raises questions about the relationship between clinical intervention and scientific proof, and it reflects on the moral justification of untried therapies and painful animal experiments. These issues are as salient today as 150 years ago. 4. Choose one person you would like to discuss your book with! I would love to speak with doctor Oscar Hasse, Nordhausen, Germany, who started the whole craze for lamb blood transfusion, and ask him why he thought it was beneficial, why he stopped doing it and what he felt about the attacks on his medical honour. 5. Your book summary in one sentence: How a daring experiment of treating very sick patients with blood from lamb spread across the world – and came to involve hope, pain and controversy.



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