

Electricity as a ‘Cure All’ in Victorian Medicine

One of the earliest recorded uses of electricity in medicine was in 48 BC, when Emperor Claudius’s physician, Scribonius Largus, recommended placing an electric torpedo fish on the head to cure migraines. But it was not until Luigi Galvani’s findings on animal electricity in 1791, and Alessandro Volta’s development of the first battery in 1799, did electricity become of great interest to medicine – albeit much of it quackery. Nevertheless, despite the fear it caused, as exemplified in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, (first published in 1818), people became fascinated by the promise and mystery of electricity.

Many devices were invented, several of which were illustrated during my talk. Many thousands of ‘magneto-electric machines for nervous diseases’ were made, like those below. The handles were placed in the patient’s hands or elsewhere on the body and the crank turned to deliver a ‘mild’ alternating current; the force depending on the speed of crank. The makers claimed that it relieved pain, cured many nervous afflictions, as well as consumption (tuberculosis), diabetes, gangrene, heart disease, lockjaw (tetanus), and spinal deformities.



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