

MEDICINE IN NEW SPAIN

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, we almost learn the secrets of a new world. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

In 1521 the Spanish conqueror Cortez set up the first European hospital in Mexico City. It was open to both Spaniards and Indians. That was the same year Leonardo da Vinci died. It was a long time ago.

The University of Mexico opened 30 years later. By 1579, the University started a medical school. That was during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Even before that, they'd given medical degrees based on a Spanish education.

Spain was interested in New World medicine. Phillip II had told his people to learn Mexican cures. But Spanish doctors had trouble with Mexican medicine. They didn't so much ask whether or not it worked. They asked instead how well the Indians held to principles of Hippocrates and Galen. They thought Mexican medicine was nothing but blind trial and error.

By 1579 the New World had produced three medical texts. Francisco Bravo published the first in 1570. Bravo hardly mentioned his Colonial experience. He discussed a local form of typhus. And he talked about the Indian herb, sarsaparilla. He said the natives didn't understand sarsaparilla's Aristotelian nature.

Then a Jesuit, Alonso Lopez de Hinojosis, wrote a surgery book. It was quite another matter. Lopez avoided the philosophic language of formal medicine. He said the Church wanted more "the salvation of the Indians' souls than their [bodily] health."

Lopez talked about 50 native herbs. They had, in his words, been "born in this land through the mercy of God."

The third book came out in 1579. Friar Agustin Farfan wrote on anatomy, surgery and medicine. He offered 60 Aztec cures for general use.

Mexico was on the way to giving Europe a huge new pharmacopoeia. Then it all stagnated. Guenter Risse tells how the long arm of Spanish orthodoxy reached across the Atlantic. The establishment closed down on work with native cures.

By the time Europeans landed in New England, Mexico was back to bloodletting and purging. The healing powers of agave, sarsaparilla, and quaiacum were being forgotten.

Today, pharmacologists comb the forests of Central and South America. They're looking for cures that've not only been forgotten -- the very species are becoming extinct.

And so we're finally picking up on work begun by a few bright Jesuits 450 years ago. But we are, alas, getting there a day late and dollar short.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

Risse, G.B., *Medicine in New Spain. Medicine in the New World* (R.L. Numbers, ed.). Knoxville: The Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1987.