

Extreme medicine

Extreme Adj Very high or highest in degree or intensity. Very far, or furthest, in any direction, especially out from the centre. Very violent or strong. Not moderate; severe.

This special issue of *The Lancet* explores the concept of extreme medicine. Whereas previous supplements have brought together topics with a unifying theme, a cursory glance at the present topic list will show that the opposite is true here. The essays we have commissioned are, in line with a dictionary definition of “extreme”, as far from the centre, or norm, of medical practice as could reasonably be imagined. The backgrounds of our authors are similarly diverse, although the authors themselves are unified by the effort they have invested in writing such succinct and informative essays.

Why is medicine extreme? Clearly this depends to a certain extent on the perspective of the observer. The medical geneticist and the expert in rodeo medicine may each consider the other’s “usual” practice extreme. To those not involved in medicine they are both extreme.

Hippocrates observed, “extreme remedies are very appropriate for extreme diseases”. Today this observation still stands, although possibly not as Hippocrates would have envisaged. For example, as our understanding of the genetic and molecular basis of many rare diseases expands, so doctors and their patients are looking to the extremes of scientific endeavour for solutions. At the other end of the scientific spectrum, Hippocrates would also have

recognised many of the events that have occurred in the past year leading doctors to the extremes of their medical practice. Wars, plagues, and political turmoil still inevitably end in individual suffering, which the medical profession attempts to address.

Is the extreme nature of medicine an advantage or a disadvantage? Again, one’s perspective defines the answer. Clearly, for the patient with a rare inherited disease, the prospect of help from a scientific discovery unimaginable 50 or even 10 years ago is helpful. The parents of children who die every year from conditions that were treatable 50 years ago, but for which money potentially available for simple cures was spent on scientific research instead, may take a different view. As the potential financial gain from every aspect of medicine increases, this polarisation of needs will become more apparent and gradually affect increasing numbers of doctors and their patients.

A collection of essays as presented here cannot hope to encompass every extreme of medicine. We have attempted to describe a range of circumstances and practices which illustrate in some way the spectrum that exists and that appears to expand with every passing year.

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