

6 Medical Jobs That Make You Glad that Medicine Has Come a Long Way

Categories : [MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS](#)

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A new medical drama is taking the airwaves by storm. [The Knick](#), on Cinemax, is not your typical medical drama. There is no McDreamy or George Clooney, and there is no other show on TV right now that could make you appreciate the envelope of technology covering your daily life.

The show takes place at New York City's (fictitious) Knickerbocker Hospital during the early part of the twentieth century...yep, over 115 years ago.

Hailed for its historical accuracy, the show highlights how a group of (fictitious) healthcare professionals saved patients with ingenuity, innovativeness and cutting edge medicine. However, be careful about your definition of "cutting edge". A century-plus ago, "cutting edge" meant some pretty sketchy stuff ...enough to make you want to give your general practitioner a big ol' hug the next time he hands you a prescription for some antibiotics.

This show is not for the feint-of-heart. However, it did get us here at Snelling thinking about some of the worst medical jobs in history....jobs that have gone by the wayside (thank goodness). Some of them occurred during the same time as *The Knick*; some were already obsolete.

1) **Body snatcher**. Believe it or not, there did not use to be enough cadavers – yes, you read that right...cadavers – available for most medical schools. Therefore, the role of a body snatcher became a lucrative (if not whispered-about) profession. Body snatchers generally worked in small

groups, scouting and pillaging fresh graves. They then sold the freshly dug up corpses to medical schools for dissection and anatomy lectures.

2) **Barber/surgeon.** Physicians use to be academics and mostly dealt with patients as observers and advisers. They considered surgery beneath them, usually because of the extremely high mortality rate. Honestly, who would want that on their conscious? Therefore, barbers use to perform surgery on anyone who was deemed “in need”. So villagers use to visit the barber to get their hair cut and their arm amputated.

3) **Medicine men.** In the late 1800s and early 1900s, “medicine men” roamed the country hosting traveling road shows where their sold “medicine” positioned as magical cure-alls for whatever ailment the audience named off. The problem was that most of these “magical elixirs” contained alcohol, morphine, codeine, cocaine, urine and even mercury. The cure was often worse than the disease itself.

4) **Leech bait.** A popular career path in the early 1800’s was to lay in a nearby pond and wait for leeches to latch onto your bare legs and then sell the bloodsuckers to local pharmacists. Moving on.

5) **Plague Doctor.** If the plague was not scary enough, the fright from seeing a costumed plague doctor might stop your already-weakened beating heart. These “doctors,” who were generally considered 2nd rate, wore beaked masks filled with perfume (the plague used to be thought of as being caused by a bad batch of air floating around the town). They used canes to examine patients and practice bloodletting, utilizing the leeches that the poor leech bait had acquired by sitting in a pond all day.

6) **Toad doctor.** Toad doctors practiced medicinal folk magic in the 18th and 19th centuries. They attempted to cure the sick by placing a live [toad](#), or the leg of one, in a [muslin](#) bag and hanging it around a sick person’s neck.