

# Richard III may have gone through painful medical treatments to 'cure' his scoliosis

April 19 2013

---

Richard III may have undergone painful medical treatments for his spinal curvature, according to research from a University of Leicester researcher.

Dr Mary Ann Lund, of the University's School of English, has carried out research into the kinds of [scoliosis](#) treatments available at the time [Richard III](#) was alive.

The remains of Richard III discovered by University of Leicester [archaeologists](#) revealed that the King suffered from severe scoliosis, which he probably developed in early adolescence.

Scoliosis – a lateral or side-to-side curvature of the spine – can be a very painful condition to live with.

But some of the treatments practised in the late [medieval period](#) would have themselves caused sufferers a lot of anguish.

Among the "cures" practised was traction – the same principle on which "the Rack" worked as an instrument of torture.

The patient would be tied under the armpits and round the legs. The ropes were then pulled at either end, often on a wooden roller, to stretch the patient's spine.

The treatment would probably have only been available to those who

could afford it.

Richard III would certainly have been able to afford the highest levels of medical care available – and his physicians would have been well aware of the standard "traction" methods for treating the condition.

Dr Lund charted the influence of Greek philosopher Hippocrates – who developed early prototype methods of dealing with spinal disorders – to the 11<sup>th</sup> century Persian polymath Avicenna.

Avicenna's treatises on medicine and philosophy were highly regarded in [Medieval Europe](#). His theories on using traction in scoliosis treatment would have been widely read and practised by doctors in Richard III's lifetime.

Avicenna also advocated the massage techniques practised in Turkish baths, and herbal applications, as treatments for back disorders. In the longer term, patients might wear a long piece of wood or metal in an attempt to straighten their back.

Dr Lund said: "Scoliosis is a painful illness, and Richard would have been in quite a lot of pain on a daily basis. These methods could also have been very painful – but people would have expected treatments to be unpleasant.

"Medical practices could exacerbate conditions rather than improving them. These treatments would have only been open to people in the upper echelons. Richard would have probably received these treatments because he was a member of the nobility."

This was a tightly fitting metal corset for treating scoliosis made by an armourer, which would have been worn by patients to brace the skeleton in an attempt to correct the curvature of the spine.

You can hear more from Dr Sarah Knight and Dr Mary Ann Lund in our podcast:

Provided by University of Leicester

Citation: Richard III may have gone through painful medical treatments to 'cure' his scoliosis (2013, April 19) retrieved 18 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-04-richard-iii-painful-medical-treatments.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.