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Top Tips from Early Modern Women: Examining Medical Cures in Two Recipe Manuscripts from the Royal College of Physicians and the Wellcome Collection

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We may all have resorted to self-diagnosis via google to cure minor ailments during covid. Medical information is readily available, but this was not always the case. Well before digital

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access, how were medical complaints treated at home during the early modern period (1500-1800)?

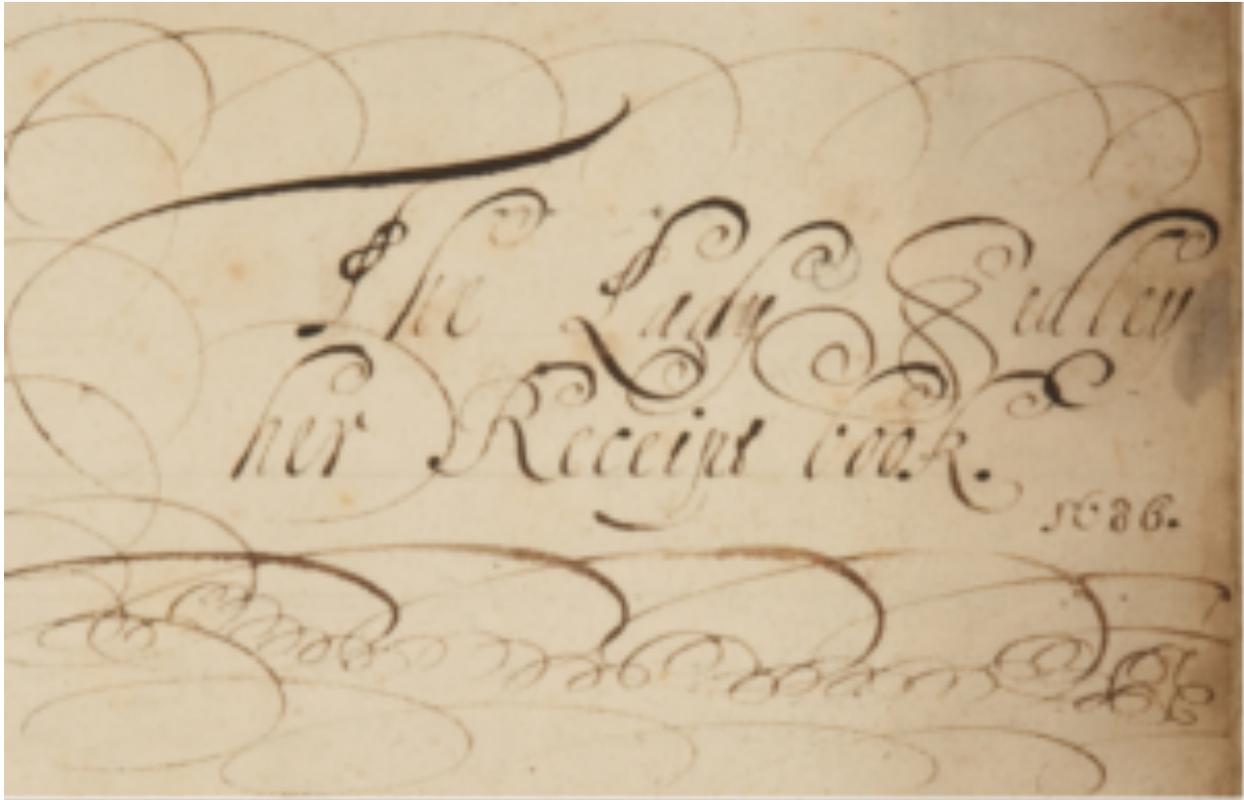
Typical remedies aimed at women were revealed in the 2021 international recipe book [transcribathon](#) which was organized by the Early Modern Recipes Online Collective (EMROC) in collaboration with [Wellcome Collection](#) and the [Royal College of Physicians](#). The act of compiling recipes for medical complaints or for the kitchen was largely performed by women and formed the very essence of healthcare and maintaining wellbeing over the centuries.

The [focus for this event](#) from Wellcome Collection was [Lady Ayscough's Receipts of phisick and chirurgery](#) dated '1692'. Ayscough's manuscript was the first acquisition to enter Wellcome's collection in 1897, and it can be viewed in full digital glory on the Wellcome Collection website. Yet without a full transcription of the manuscript's contents means that analysis of the recipes has been sketchy, sporadic and certainly not comprehensive to date. The opportunity to investigate the entire script in detail via the transcription event was long overdue, and, indeed, it yielded important insights into the people and practices reflected in the manuscript.



Inscription bearing the name of Lady Ayscough (Ms.1026) Source: [Ayscough, Lady | Wellcome Collection](#)

Coincidentally, the Royal College of Physicians chose [Lady Sedley's manuscript book](#) for the event. Lady Sedley, whose identity is associated with the initial script (the later different script has not yet been identified), is believed to be Ann Ayscough, the daughter of a Yorkshire gentleman and who became Sir Charles Sedley's common law second wife around 1672. Although many recipe books from this period bear similarities, linking them to known historical people remains a challenge. Whether the authors of these two manuscripts were related is unknown but offers a tantalising possibility. Of course, it is only because Lord Sedley was such a well-known and documented figure that it is possible so find incidental records of his female family members.



Inscription bearing the name of Lady Sedley (([MS 534](#))) Source: [Royal College of Physicians](#))

Analysis of the handwriting in both manuscripts does not shine any further light on the authorship since many gentlewomen would have hired professional calligraphers rather than perform this task themselves. However, the advantages of transcribing two recipe books simultaneously provided an opportunity to compare similarities and differences. While Ayscough's manuscript provides an index to the recipes at the beginning, as was common for ease of access at the time of composing, Sedley's index appears at the end in what appears to be a later script.

Two specific recipes appear in both: 'Lucatellus balsom' and 'Oyle of charity'. For the balsom, in both recipes, Venice Turpatine (a variant of 'Turpentine') is steeped in 'sallit oyle' (usually olive oil) or sack (a wine-based drink) and boiled and reddened with 'red sanders' and used as a balsom for 'green wounds, scalds and burns or bruises. In Ayscough's however, the instruction is more specific: the remedy was only successful if the mixture was 'buried a yard underground in dry earth' for a year 'in an Earthen pot well-greased both within and without and covered first with leather then with lead'. Lucatellus's electuary was presumably well known - it was listed in 'A New BOOK OF Knowledge; Treating of Things, Whereof some are Profitable, some Precious, and some Pleasant and Delightful of 1697 (as seen here: [A new book of knowledge treating of things ...](#) and again, in Thomas Fuller's 1710 'Pharmacopeia Extemporanea', among other publications (see)

In the case of the two versions of ‘Oyle of charity’ in both manuscripts, the ingredients are similar bar a few exceptions: in Sedley's version, the additional ingredient, valerian (a relaxant) is listed; In Ayscough's version, ‘cut cut grass’ was added after straining the concoction. In both cases, the remedy was used for bruises, though in Sedley's it was useful particularly for toothache.

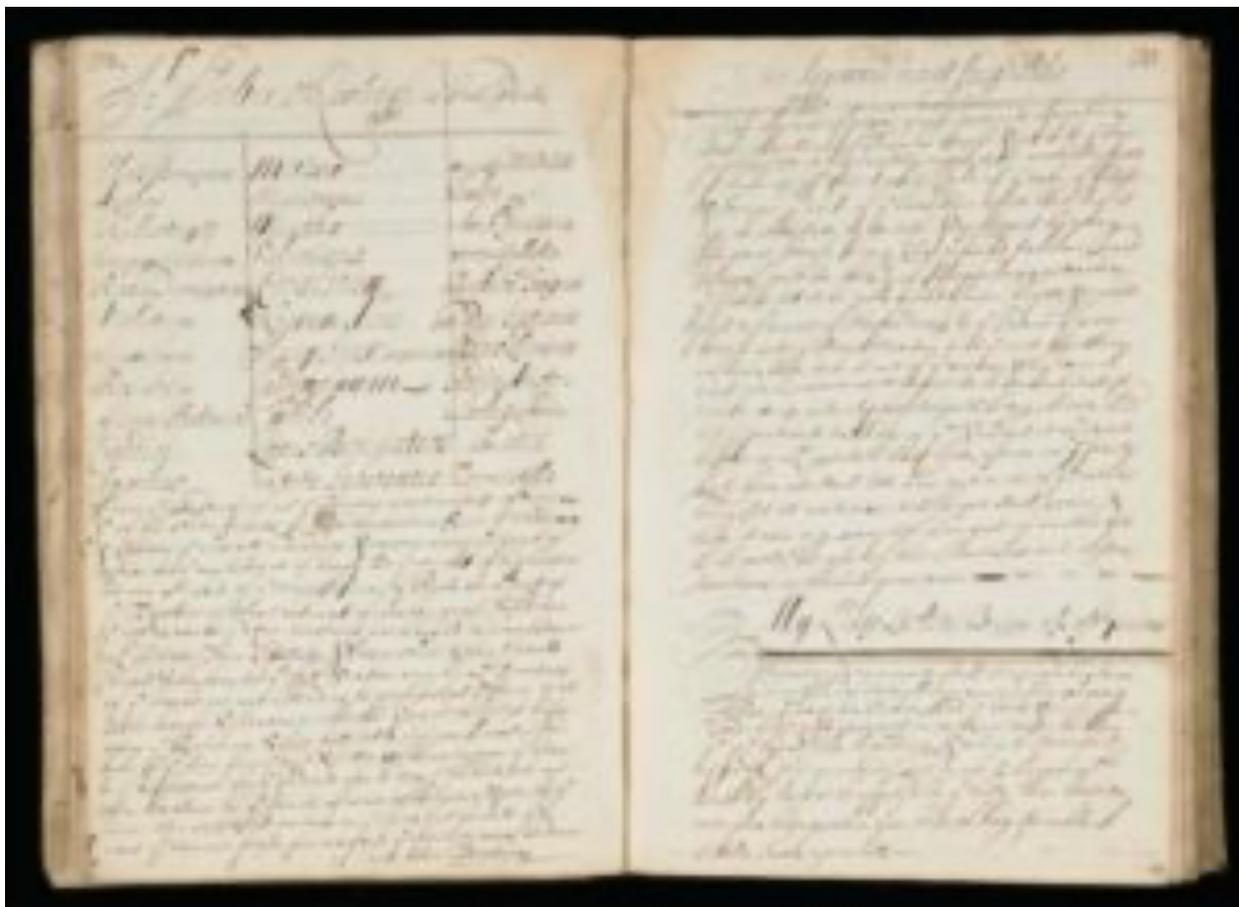
As women of high status, Lady Ayscough and Lady Sedley were not alone in collecting recipes on behalf of their family and wider circle of dependents. Also in the Wellcome collection are the recipe books of Lady Fanshawe ([Ms.7113](#)), Lady Pulston ([Ms.8048](#)), Lady Eleanor Dundas ([Ms.2242](#)) and most noble of all, Princess Maria Rosalia, Duchess of Troppau and Princess of Liechtenstein ([Ms.2290](#)), among others.

Although it is impossible to be certain of the identity of the authors of both manuscripts, we can get a sense of them and the skills they practiced from contemporary publications which would have been read and used by similar ‘gentlewomen’: [The Accomplished Ladies Rich closet of Rarities](#) was published by John Shirley in 1691, contemporary with Ayscough's recipe book. The [vignettes](#) in the frontispiece to this book illustrate the type of activities practiced by women including baking, churning, distilling, and nursing.



Frontispiece to [The Accomplished Ladies Rich closet of Rarities](#), 1691

It is common to see more recipes aimed specifically at women though in Ayscough's manuscript there appear to be more than in Sedley's. Most recipes were aimed for use by the household at large including the service staff and possibly as well as the local community linked to the estate. Child mortality was high in the seventeenth century, but women were also prone to miscarry, so accordingly a number of recipes address the problem and also the health of women in the aftermath of a miscarriage. Solutions in Ayscough's manuscript included distilled herbal concoctions containing some recognizable wound healers ([comfrey](#) and [plantain](#)), others less so ('*angell sheeperds pouch*') mixed in a draught made up of a fresh egg yolk and 'cockeneile' (a red powder derived from the dried insect, [cochineal](#)).



Ayscough's recipe book, 22-23

If a woman was fortunate enough to carry her baby to full term, recipes such as, '*to cause speedy deliverance,*' included aromatic herbs ([sage](#) and [winter savory](#)) that were '*washed, bruised and boiled*' in a white-wine drink imbued with saffron, [betony](#), parsley and, most importantly the bitter herb, [wormwood](#) (or absinthe) which was used to both flavor and ease griping pains.

Midwives would have been called for in the event of delivery, but the presence of recipes in this manuscript, and many others like it, suggest that these recipes were for use by household staff and probably even ladies of the house, who would have assisted with the preparation of medicinal remedies.

Some recipes were borrowed from friends, colleagues or acquaintances and often credited with the original author. An ale-based ‘*cordial to bring away an after birth*’, which was comprised of ‘*black rie flowers*’ for instance, originates from a *Mrs Tassel in Ayscough’s book*. Other remedies for afterbirth pains included pricey ingredients that could only have been purchased from an apothecary: ‘*mithricate*’ refers to [mithridate](#), a complex compound which consisted of up to 65 ingredients. Also known as treacle or theriac, mithridate was originally made as an antidote to poison in classical times. To promote childbirth, Sedley’s manuscript includes a recipe ‘For a woman travelling with child to make her soon be delivered’ which includes powdered ‘Bittonye [betony] and date Stones’ which was consumed as a drink.

Also tips on ‘[the flowing of flowers](#)’ (menstruation) originate from Mrs Flone, who recommends using the ‘*juice of plantine*’ ([plantain](#)) dipped in a cloth: the reader is instructed to ‘*lett one of the maides warm itt a little between her hands & then lay itt to the belly*’. The same ingredient was powdered and added to water with ‘*fine bole armony*’ ([Armenian bole](#)), ‘*red coran (coral) and amber*’, basically a red colored healing concoction aimed to rebalance the body and drunk several times a day. Such a recipe would have been a valued addition to the manuscript as it offered women some control over their reproductive health, addressing the same range of concerns voiced by women today. In the seventeenth century, blood was considered the most important of the four humors, nourishing the entire body as a key component of flesh and bone. Maintaining a regular monthly menstrual cycle was therefore believed to be vital – corruption of this blood caused by its retention was considered a dangerous condition that could lead to infertility, discomfort, pain, uterine disease, delayed and or abnormal childbirths and mental illness. If not expelled in the usual way it was believed it could flow from the nose or the breasts, a medieval theory that continued to percolate!

So, ingredients are puzzling and often no suggestion as to their use. The dried ‘*lungs of a fox*’, for instance, are recommended in an alcoholic delicacy mysteriously entitled ‘*Roles for Mr Ayscough*’ which were laced with sugar – a luxurious afternoon sweet treat perhaps.

Bizarre though some recipes may seem, these manuscripts provide a glimpse into the everyday lives of women (and men) in pre-industrial societies and their attempts to practice healthcare. In the words of one of the founding members of EMROC who participated in a live workshop during the transcribathon hosted by Wellcome Collection, Jennifer Munroe, the writings of the women who collated these recipe books ‘*are a continuous call-and-response, hearkening back to their own personal experiences of developing these recipes while simultaneously anticipating the needs and desires of future readers*’ ([source](#)). The recipe book was a much-treasured pocket manuscript full of practical medical and culinary advice for the household and surrounding community and was compiled with the intention of handing down through generations of women. The postmodern transcription community continues to further the legacy of these early modern female authors by keeping their words of advice open by making them accessible for future generations. Long may they continue. To view Ayscough’s digitized manuscript, see [Ms.1026](#), for Lady Sedley’s, see [MS534](#). and for more manuscripts from the Royal College of Physicians visit the [internet archive](#), and for a history of the institution, see <https://history.rcplondon.ac.uk/>

Here are some recipe highlights from Lady Ayscough's recipe book:

For *the* Flowing of Flowers

Take *the* Juice of Plantine Juse it with
a cloth wett the Cloath often
Dypp a cloath in plantane water lett one
of *the* maides warm itt a little betweene
her hands + then lay itt to *the* belly when
it beginneth to dry renew it againe
Take fine bole Armony 2 drams red coran
and Amber of each an ounce powder them
very small and drink a spoonfull of it in
the powder of plantaine water twice or
thrice a day
Mrs Flone

For Help After Pains

[Take a gram or 2 of seruply] of [mithricate] mix it with 4 or 5 grains of powder of rofin if
y^e think it be goat after [olivorance] then give the following julep 3 or 4 [limoday .] Take of
frog [splean] water 4 ounces of y^e smaller sort of cinnimon water, an ounce [of] half of sugar
of [rofos] two ounces of surup of forrall 2 ounces of koop [yr.] For if y^e flux stop so soon boil
birlfroot and balm in y^e oat meal cordiall. In case y^e after birth should slip from y^e midwifes
hand, if there be [suckling] women by let y^e [woma] suck of her milk [if it] will in half an hour
make it come to hand.

A Reccit for a woman apt to miscary

Take cumphry roots and leafes flowers of white arch
angell sheperds pouch plantain knott grass nip let
them be distilled with milk take clary leafes & flowers
distill *them* in A glass limbeck putt fresh hearbs unto
them and dstill *them* 5 or 6 times over take 20 boress
Cockeneile take 4 treads and ye yolk of a new laid
Egg eat it up & drink ye Cocheneile, with a draught
of these 2 waters mingled together

Mrs. Shan Powder

Take myrrh, saffron & [bazor] of each [6 3] make it
into fine powder take this dose at 6 times in A
spoonfull of this possit drink make clear possit
drink of small Ale & white wine boil in itt dittany
of [cerla] drink of this 3 times A day for a fortnight
together.

Mrs Tassels Cordial to bring Away an ^{after birth}

Take A quart of Small Ale boil it but [*Seam*] it not then thicken it with black Rie flowers, boil it well like other Cordiall.

My Lady Pomander

Take one pound of Roses buds purely cut from *the* White & finely beaten 2 Ounces of [*Benjamin*] 40 grains of Amber Grease 24 Grains of musk 10 grains of Sivet 12 grains of *the* Spirit of Roses one Ounce of *the* Oyle of [*Jessamyn*], [*soe*] make it up [*with*] [*Samb*] black & Gumm Dragon Steep'd in Roses water & Orange flower water, if you haue not leasure [*to*] make it while *your* Roses are fresh, you may [*be*] at *your* Roses after the *former* [*manner*] and dry them when you vse [*Searce*] them very finely, make up your pomander [*with*] the [*Crums*] of A [*Manchett*] dipt in Orange flower or Damask rose Water your Pomander^{er} will be better if the third part of the Grounds, be Clove Gilly flowers & sweat marjoru^m finely beaten & Searced are the Roses

Roles for Mrs. Ayscough

Take of chosen Liquors made into fine powder one Dram and A half and *the* Lungs of A Fox dryed and made into fine powder one Dram of fine Sugar Candy.

For Help After Pains

[*Take a gram or 2 of seruply*] of [*mithricate*] mix it with 4 or 5 grains of powder of rofin if y^e think it be groat after [*olivorance*] then give the following julep 3 or 4 [*limoday* .] Take of frog [*splean*] water 4 ounces of y^e smaller sort of cinnimon water, an ounce [*off*]half of sugar of [*rofos*] two ounces of surup of forrall 2 ounces of koop [*yr.*] For if y^e flux stop so soon boil birlfroot and balm in y^e oat meal cordiall. In case y^e after birth should slip from y^e midwives hand, if there be [*suckling*] women by let y^e [*woma*] suck of her milk [*if it*] will in half an hour make it come to hand.

To comfort the Braine

Take womans milk of one *that* giues suck to a boy 3 spoonfulls of Redrose water 3 spoonfulls, Unhen when you are in bed laid to sleep; snuff some of this up your nose holding back your head, soe *that* yu may hauk some of it into your mouth; This use often in *the* day, but esperially in *the* Night when you goe to bed

Hard travaile in child birth

1. The date stones *which* have round small holes in *the* sides (for they are best) dry them gently in an Oven beat them to powder: take commine seeds & graines, & English saffron, made to fine powders misce; one spoonfull with a little malmsye, and drink it blood warm; and if you add a Quantity of white Amer beaten with *the* rest it will be *the* better if *the* Malmsy be not sweet enough you may put in sugar; but take it soe as you leave none of *the* powder, behind this may bee taken though *the* Child bee well and neer *the* birth. This is alsoe Good for any Woman *that* hath a riseing in her stomack after shee is delivered if she have any heat or flushing in her face after shee is delivered or dureing her Childbed; it is good alsoe for *the* after burthen when *the* woman is delivered Dittany boyled & drunken in wine doth bring forth *the* after birth & causeth safe & Quick delivery,

To cause Speedy deliverance

Take Sage and winter Savory, wash ym bruise ym in A mortar boil them in a pint of white wine give this to drink with A dram of saffron made into fine powder: about an hour after boil Betony wormwood & parsley leaves & roots in Spring water and drink well of it.

For *the* Flowing of Flowers

Take *the* Juice of Plantine Juse it with a cloth wett the Cloath often
Dypp a cloath in plantane water lett one of *the* maides warm itt a little betweene her hands + then lay itt to *the* belly when it beginneth to dry renew it againe
Take fine bole Armony 2 drams red coran and Amber of each an ounce powder them very small and drink a spoonfull of it in *the* powder of plantaine water twice or thrice a day
Mrs Flone

For your Greensickness From Mrs Hore Probat

Take rowe wormes & slit them & wash of all the dirt within them & wash them well in white

wine dry them in an oven, and beat them to powder; take as much as will lye upon [6 pounce] in possitt Alo, and walk upon itt. Probat

For to Heale

Nipples

For ^{to} little after Delivery

Boyle a good many Marygold flowers in possett Ale made with white wine soe drink

A most rare powder which the Countess of Barkes paid after the rate of ten pound the ounce

Take seed pearle; new corral; white Amber
Crabbs eyes, harts horne, of each alike quantity
and to every ounce of the things aforesaid, take
one dram of Bezer stone bray them very well
in an Iron mortar, then take the black tipps of
Crabbs claws when y^e signe is in Cancer, as much
of this as of the rest, powder itt, & sift these
altogether through a very fine searce then make
itt up in little balles with Jelly of harts horne
and then dry itt, you may take 8 or 10 or 12 or
15 graines of this in Extremity & noe more, noe
Bezer stone, nor Unicornes horne, nor Alkermes
though taken in double quantity is able to match it

The Vertues

1. It preserveth from the Infection of Plague
2. It saveth the life being infected taken in time
3. It expelleth all poyson from the heart of what kind soever
4. It cures All Agues; mittigates the fitts of y^e Quartan
5. It helps surfetts & It helps the falling sickness
7. It availes much in Consumptions taken often
8. It helpeth Women in Labour

There is not any sikness wherein it availeth not

For further reading:

Elaine Leong: [Recipes and Everyday Knowledge: Medicine, Science, and the Household in Early Modern England](#), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2018

Anne Stobart: [Household Medicine in Seventeenth Century England](#), (London: Bloomsbury Academic), 2016.