From the mid-sixteenth century the foundations of modern science were laid with increasing understanding of the anatomy and physiology of the human body, helped by the advent of the printed books with clear illustrations enabling new discoveries to be published. Qualified physicians were rarely found in small towns, the majority working in the cities where their university education enabled them to practise in the big hospitals. They also attended the rich in town or occasionally at one of the country estates such as Stockwood, Luton Hoo or Putteridge Bury, if the physician was prepared to make the long ride on horseback. A noted doctor of physic in Dunstable and Houghton Regis was Thoswithan Brandreth who died in 1752.

Barber surgeons, who learned in apprentice fashion, working with razor and scalpel, increasingly used their skills to incise abscesses and to excise tumours. Two local barber surgeons were Josias Settle, the father of Restoration dramatist, Elkanah Settle (1648-1724) who practised in Dunstable, and Cornelius Bigland of Luton, known to us through his will published in 1673.

Apothecaries were the humblest of the three medical professions. They kept a stock of drugs and made up prescriptions - for those who could pay. At first they also visited patients in their own homes and prescribed treatment although the physicians tried to prevent this. Sometimes a dual professional role was practised: for example, Thomas Warren was both a surgeon and an apothecary in Dunstable in 1766. The treatment of people with fractures was carried out by bone setters. Unqualified midwives were available for most women with an occasional man-midwife able to give treatment to the more prosperous. The names of Samuel Chase and Sons and Robert Kirby who were in business as men-midwives, apothecaries and surgeons are recorded in the Luton Trade Directory of 1785.

Every community had its share of simple minded folk who were accepted as part of everyday life - the traditional village idiots - but the uncontrollably mentally ill were the most misunderstood group of all. They were often restrained, whipped, purged, treated as witches or incarcerated in Bedford Gaol. When the devil thought to be inside them refused to come out, they could be committed to Bedlam in London.

Progress in medicine was hampered for many years by the distaste of both the law and the church for anatomical dissection of dead bodies. A few corpses of executed criminals were allowed to the teaching hospitals each year but not enough. Frustrated physicians and surgeons needed bodies of people who had died a natural death to further their knowledge. Burke and Hare methods (killing in order to sell the corpses) were not practised in this area but there is evidence of the activity of resurrectionists who stole bodies recently buried. Worthington Smith in his History of Dunstable and its surroundings (1904) records that when coaching was at its busiest, resurrectionists or body-snatchers were active in the neighbourhood of Dunstable.

The Poor Law Acts of 1601 and 1662 made each parish responsible for its own sick, aged, poor and orphaned children. The able bodied were to be sent to work or to a house of correction. Each parish provided a workhouse intended originally for the homeless or men unable to find work but very soon