Doctors at war
How did physicians navigate the English civil war? Wendy Moore was fascinated by the 17th century tales of conflict and diplomacy in an exhibition from the collections of their royal college.

Wendy Moore

An End to Good Manners
An exhibition at the Royal College of Physicians, London NW1 4LE
Free; until 15 March 2012
www.rcplondon.ac.uk/museum-and-garden/whats/rcp-and-english-civil-war
Rating: ***

How do doctors behave during civil war? Do they put patients first, stick rigidly to political and religious principles, or simply look after themselves? The answer, during the English civil war at least, is all of these things, as a thought provoking exhibition at the Royal College of Physicians in London shows.

Fascinating more for the narrative it unfolds than the artefacts on display, rare and special as they are, the exhibition prompts the timeless question of how human beings react in situations of immense turmoil. The title, “An end to good manners,” says it all. During the seven years of turbulence that ripped apart families, friends, and communities in 17th century England, physicians showed just as much courage, cowardice, and sheer cunning as anyone else.

At the beginning of the civil war in 1642, the College of Physicians numbered fewer than 40 doctors, and its powers were limited to licensing medicine within the capital. When parliamentary forces took control of London, and Charles I fled to Oxford, physicians were faced with a blunt choice. They could either stay in London and bow to Cromwell’s commands or escape the capital and throw in their lot with the royalists.

The decision was less clear cut than might be imagined. Having been founded in 1518 under a charter from Henry VIII, the college might have been expected to stick with the crown. Indeed, eight of its fellows were royal physicians. But punishing taxes and church censorship of medical documents had made the king as unpopular with doctors as with anyone else. The college chose a tortuous path to remain essentially neutral while the civil war divided physicians as it did the rest of the country.

William Harvey stayed faithful to the king, his close friend, who had supported his ground breaking discovery of the circulation of blood 26 years earlier. At the battle of Edgehill, Harvey sheltered the two princes, the future Charles II and James II, under a bush. But the move to royalist headquarters at Oxford meant his London home was looted and a prized manuscript on insects lost forever. After the king was executed, the 71 year old Harvey was expelled from London as a threat to national security.

John Bastwick, on the other hand, was a fervent parliamentarian—and with good cause. For his attack on the church, The Letany of John Bastwick, he was imprisoned by Charles I, had his licence revoked by the college, and had his ears cut off. He was released by Cromwell in 1644 when the college renewed his licence, although it could do nothing about his ears.

Both Harvey and Bastwick stuck to their beliefs in the face of huge personal loss. Others were less principled. As a royal physician, George Bate naturally fled to Oxford with the court. But when he saw the roundheads gaining the upper hand, he promptly switched sides and became Cromwell’s personal physician. After the Restoration, Bate shrewdly changed colours again and was anointed royal physician once more. No doubt rumours that Bate had poisoned Cromwell, which Bate was careful not to scotch, helped his rehabilitation. It was with some justice that he was known to colleagues as “the amphibious and ambidextrous Dr Bate.”

Somehow Théodore Turquet de Mayerne managed to remain completely above the fray. The French doctor, who came to England as court physician to Charles I, refused the king’s summons to tend him in York and threatened parliament he would leave the country if his taxes were not reduced. Only a personal plea from Queen Henrietta Maria, with a desperate postscript from Charles I begging him to come to Exeter “for the love of me”—in a remarkable document on display—persuaded Mayerne to deliver the queen’s last child.

His colleague Edward Emily switched sides, however, but for entirely principled reasons. Outraged at the king’s excesses he supported Cromwell, but when Cromwell proved as tyrannical as the former monarch Emily delivered a blistering attack at the college’s inaugural Harveian oration in 1656. The college shrewdly ruled that all future orations should be checked by its president first, a precaution that is still in place today.

Deftly ducking and diving, the college emerged from the conflict stronger than before. Having survived attempts by apothecaries to encroach on physicians’ territory during the war, the college confirmed its founding charter and licensing rights with Charles II and became for the first time the Royal College of Physicians. It was with justification that the college annals...
looked back on the years of crisis from the peaceful days of the
Restoration as “an end to good manners.”

Any attempt to draw parallels with doctors caught up in civil
wars today should be made with extreme caution. In the 17th
century physicians lived in a small world, where everyone knew
everyone else, with a big communication problem: a letter could
take several days to travel from London to York. There was no
Facebook announcement of Cromwell’s victory at Naseby or
YouTube footage of Charles I being beheaded. And yet the
choices people made, between family and fortune, principles
and pragmatism, were down to personal conscience then as ever.

Competing interests: None declared.
Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer
reviewed.

Cite this as: BMJ 2011;343:d7606
© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2011