

# The origins of British sports medicine, 1850–1914

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Neil Carter

## Summary

This article, by focussing on athletes' training methods and treatments for sporting injuries, examines the origins of sports medicine in Britain from around 1850 to 1914. Although, the phrase 'sports medicine' had not yet been invented, the article explains how the development of sports medicine during this period was shaped by a wider historical context. Difficulties over defining sports medicine, for example, stemmed from its status as a holistic practice in an increasingly professionalised medical world. Moreover, ideas concerning the training of athletes reflected both contemporary shifts in medical thinking, especially physiology, and a power struggle between orthodox and unorthodox medical practitioners. During this period, an increasingly competitive sporting world, also gave rise to the sporting injury and the need for specialised treatments. However, rather these treatments further mirrored contemporary medical practices.

*Keywords: Sports medicine, medical profession, unorthodox medicine, training, injuries, treatment*

## Introduction

The most famous sporting doctor was arguably the English cricketer William Gilbert Grace. His cricketing sobriquet was 'the Doctor' because he worked as a doctor in the winter while his summers were devoted to cricket. During one game, he was on hand to treat a fellow player, ACM Croome, who, in attempting to take a catch, fell and impaled his throat on a spike of one of the railings surrounding the ground. Grace, along with his brother EM, another doctor, rushed over to tend to Croome. They carried Croome to the

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Neil Carter, International Centre for Sports History and Culture, De Montfort University, Leicester (GB) (necarter@dmu.ac.uk).

pavilion and stitched up the wound, which was not as serious as first feared.<sup>1</sup> Of course, this was not a sporting injury as such more like a ‘normal’ one sustained in a sporting environment. Grace himself did not specialise in the treatment of sporting injuries. Why should he have? There was no real demand at the time for this service. Moreover, in the late nineteenth century, there were no specialist medical organisations devoted to sport, nor had any sports established medical committees dedicated to the welfare of athletes. As a consequence, there were no doctors with any specialised knowledge of sports medicine.

However, a relationship between sport and medicine did exist in the late 19th century, and the later development of sports medicine as a speciality was one product of this relationship. This article examines the early development of sports medicine in Britain. It argues that sports medicine was shaped by wider social forces rather than any inexorable logic. To give an insight into this process, the article is chiefly concerned with the training of athletes, their medical provision and the treatment of injuries. Rather than write a teleological account and ridicule past therapies as useless and dangerous, the aim here is to understand the ideas and beliefs that have underpinned the practice of sports medicine and to recognise this in its wider historical context.

## **What is sports medicine?**

First though what is meant by sports medicine? Sports medicine has traditionally been difficult to define. The term had not been invented by 1914 and as a specialism sports medicine has been a relatively late modern invention. It was probably only in 1930s that the first book to use the term was written: Dr Herbert Herxheimer’s *Grundriss der Sportmedizin (Foundations of Sports Medicine)* was published in Germany. An international organisation, the Fédération Internationale de Médecine Sportive (FIMS), was founded in 1928.<sup>2</sup> However, sports medicine was not used regularly in the English language until the formation of the American College of Sports Medicine in 1954 and it was in 1962 that the first major English language text to have the phrase in the title was published, JGP Williams (ed.) *Sports Medicine*.

1 Rae 1998, 314.

2 It was originally called the Association Internationale Médico-Sportive (AIMS). In 1933, the name was changed to Fédération Internationale Médico-Sportive et Scientifique before it adopted its current title in 1934.