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The Scientization of Western Medicine and the evolution of health management paradigms: A historical and conceptual inquiry

Dr. Lung-Tan Lu
Department of Management, Fo Guang University, Jiaoxi, Yilan, Taiwan

Abstract
This paper examines the transformation of Western medicine through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tracing how its scientization reshaped modern health management paradigms. Drawing on the interdisciplinary frameworks of medical history and the history of health thought, this study analyzes the epistemological, institutional, and sociocultural dimensions of medicine's scientific turn and the formation of the biomedical model. It argues that the rise of experimental medicine, bacteriology, and public health institutionalization redefined the relationship between health, disease, and medical intervention, shifting health management from passive treatment to proactive prevention and from individual care to collective governance. Yet this transformation also introduced new dilemmas—reductionism, technological dominance, and inequity in health resources—that continue to shape contemporary global health systems. By integrating classical sources from Hippocrates and Galen with modern scholarship from Engel, Porter, and Bynum, this article reconstructs the historical logic underlying biomedical rationality and its consequences for health management. The study concludes that transcending the biomedical model requires embracing biopsychosocial and humanistic paradigms that reintegrate biological, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions of health. Such a reorientation would move medicine toward holistic health, humanistic care, cultural inclusivity, and social justice in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Western Medicine, Scientization, Biomedical Model, health management, medical history, health thought

Introduction

Since the early twentieth century, Western scientific medicine has become the dominant paradigm of global health governance. Its ascendancy was neither inevitable nor purely technological—it emerged from a complex historical process in which medicine was gradually transformed from a philosophical and empirical craft into a rigorous experimental science. This "scientization" of medicine—rooted in the rise of laboratory research, germ theory, and public health administration—fundamentally reshaped humanity's understanding of health and disease. It also redefined the social role of medicine, expanding its purview from individual treatment to collective management, and from local healing practices to state-level health systems (Porter, 1997; Rosenberg, 2021) [28, 29]. The consolidation of the biomedical model in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries marked a critical epistemological shift. Health came to be defined as the absence of physiological abnormality, while disease was reduced to quantifiable deviations within biological systems. This view underpinned new medical practices emphasizing objectivity, quantification, and interventionism (Engel, 1977; Brody, 2003) [6, 13]. The resulting transformation extended beyond clinical medicine—it influenced the development of health policy, insurance systems, and the ethics of health governance. As medicine became institutionalized through universities, hospitals, and national health services, its authority expanded to define the very boundaries of normality, deviance, and well-being (Foucault, 1973; Greene, 2018) [15, 16].

From a historical and philosophical standpoint, the scientization of Western medicine is a defining episode in the broader intellectual history of modernity. It exemplifies the triumph of empiricism and positivism over metaphysical or vitalist conceptions of life, mirroring similar shifts in physics, chemistry, and biology. Yet medicine's transformation also reveals the ambivalence of scientific progress: while it brought unprecedented advances in disease control and human longevity, it also introduced reductionist tendencies that fragmented the unity of the human person and marginalized psychological, social, and cultural aspects of health (Whitaker, 2009; Huber *et al*., 2011) [19, 31]. The central aim of this paper is to reconstruct this transformation historically and conceptually—to analyze how the scientific revolution in Western medicine generated the biomedical model, how this model restructured health management paradigms, and what epistemological and ethical challenges emerged in its wake. By situating these developments within the intertwined histories of medicine and ideas about health, the study seeks to contribute to the growing field of medical humanities and the critical historiography of health management.

The intellectual roots of Western medicine lie in the Hippocratic and Galenic traditions, which conceived health as a dynamic equilibrium between bodily humors, environmental factors, and moral conduct. The Corpus Hippocraticum articulated an early naturalistic model of disease, attributing illness to disturbances in the balance of blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile, influenced by climate, diet, and lifestyle. Galen systematized this view into a comprehensive physiological theory, embedding medical practice within the cosmological and ethical order of Greco-Roman thought (Nutton, 2013; Bynum, 2008) [7, 25]. Health, in this paradigm, was not merely a biological condition but a moral and environmental harmony—a view that persisted for nearly two millennia. Historians such as Porter (1997) [28], Duffy (1990) [12], and Rosenberg (2021) [29] identify the nineteenth century as the critical period when medicine was fully subsumed into the scientific worldview. Three developments stand out: the rise of experimental medicine, the introduction of precision instruments (such as

the microscope, stethoscope, and sphygmomanometer), and the institutionalization of medical education and hospitals. The laboratory became the site where life itself was rendered measurable, and the physician transformed into a scientific observer rather than a philosophical healer (Canguilhem, 1978) [8]. The works of Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch, establishing germ theory, replaced humoral and miasmatic explanations of disease with microbial causation, reinforcing medicine's epistemological allegiance to biology (Latour, 1988) [22].

The concept of the "biomedical model" was formally articulated by George Engel in 1977 [13], who critiqued the reductionist orientation of modern medicine and called for a biopsychosocial alternative (Engel, 1977) [13]. Subsequent scholarship in medical sociology, anthropology, and the humanities has elaborated this critique. Scholars such as Brody (2003) [6], Farmer (2003) [14], Hoff (2012) [18], and Greenhalgh (2023) [17] argue that while the biomedical model achieved remarkable success in controlling infectious diseases and developing therapeutic technologies, it also narrowed the scope of health management to physiological repair, marginalizing the social determinants of health and the lived experience of illness. More recent work in health humanities and global health ethics seeks to integrate humanistic and cultural perspectives into health management (Biehl & Petryna, 2013; Huber *et al*., 2011) [4, 19]. Existing literature provides extensive analysis of medical technologies and institutions but often neglects the intellectual continuity linking ancient holistic thought with modern health management. Moreover, while the limitations of the biomedical model have been widely discussed, fewer studies trace these limitations back to the epistemological foundations of scientized medicine itself. This study fills that gap by combining historical and conceptual analysis, integrating classical medical philosophy with contemporary debates in health management and medical humanities.

This paper is guided by three interrelated questions:

1. How did the scientization of Western medicine during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries unfold, and what were its primary intellectual and institutional drivers?
2. What epistemological assumptions underlie the biomedical model, and how have they shaped modern health management practices and ideologies?
3. In what ways have these assumptions produced limitations—such as reductionism, technological dominance, and inequality—and what paradigmatic shifts might transcend them?

To address these questions, the study adopts a four-stage analytical framework:

1. Historical genealogy: tracing the conceptual transformation from classical humoralism to laboratory medicine;
2. Theoretical analysis: examining the epistemological foundations of the biomedical model;
3. Critical reflection: evaluating the model's limitations in contemporary health management;
4. Constructive synthesis: proposing integrative paradigms that reconcile scientific medicine with holistic and humanistic approaches.

Classical Medical Traditions and Pre-Scientific Conceptions of Health

The Hippocratic and Galenic corpus articulated the earliest systematic framework of health in Western civilization. The humoral theory posited that the body's well-being depended on the equilibrium of four fluids—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile—each corresponding to the four elemental principles of nature: air, water, fire, and earth. Disease was understood as a disruption of this balance, and the physician's role was to restore harmony through diet, exercise, and environmental adjustment rather than radical intervention (Nutton, 2013) [25]. This model integrated physiology with ethics and cosmology. As Bynum (2008) [7] observes, the Hippocratic physician was as much a moral philosopher as a practitioner of bodily care. Health signified not merely physical integrity but the individual's attunement to natural and social order. The Galenic synthesis in late antiquity extended this idea by linking humoral composition to temperament and moral character—an early psychosomatic anthropology that bound medicine to moral philosophy. Thus, the pre-scientific paradigm treated disease as a disturbance of harmony within the person and the cosmos, anticipating later holistic approaches in preventive medicine and health promotion.

With the Christianization of Europe, healing became embedded in theological frameworks. The Church interpreted illness as both divine punishment and spiritual opportunity, placing monasteries and charitable hospitals at the center of medical care (Duffy, 1990) [12]. Monastic infirmaries emphasized prayer, moral purification, and communal service; physical remedies were secondary to spiritual healing. Despite its theological orientation, this model preserved a concern for the integration of body, soul, and community that would later be lost in the mechanistic turn of modern science. At the same time, medicine remained largely empirical and experience-based. Physicians recorded symptom patterns, experimented with herbal compounds, and drew upon Greco-Arabic texts transmitted through the Islamic world. By the late Middle Ages, however, scholasticism's preference for textual authority over observation limited empirical progress. The body was still interpreted through Aristotelian teleology and moral hierarchy—a living manifestation of cosmic order rather than an autonomous biological system (Siraisi, 1990) [30].

Pre-scientific Western medicine displayed three defining traits that profoundly contrast with modern biomedicine. First, holism—the inseparability of body, mind, and environment. Disease was not an isolated event but a relational imbalance involving the individual and nature. Second, experiential empiricism—knowledge arose from long-term clinical observation, not standardized experiment. The authority of the physician depended on accumulated wisdom, not on laboratory evidence. Third, moral-religious humanism—healing carried ethical and communal dimensions; to treat the sick was an act of compassion and moral duty. Although these features lack the precision of modern science, they preserved a synthetic understanding of human life that resonates with today's calls for integrative and person-centered health management.

The Scientific Revolution and the Transformation of Western Medicine

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries introduced an epistemological rupture. The mechanical philosophy of Galileo, Descartes, and Newton redefined nature as a domain governed by quantifiable laws. The human body was reconceived as a machine composed of parts operating

under physical principles (Canguilhem, 1978) [8]. Cartesian dualism separated mind and body, relegating the soul to metaphysics and the body to physiology—an intellectual division that would later underpin biomedical reductionism. The true scientization of medicine, however, occurred in the nineteenth century. Claude Bernard's Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale (1865) codified the principles of experimental medicine, insisting that biological phenomena must be investigated through controlled observation and reproducible experiment. Medicine, once an art, became an applied natural science (Bernard, 1865/1957) [2]. Laboratories proliferated across Europe: Johannes Müller's and Emil du Bois-Reymond's physiology institutes in Germany, and the Pasteur Institute in France, institutionalized research as the core of medical knowledge production. As Porter (1997) [28] notes, these laboratories "made the invisible visible." Microscopy, chemical analysis, and quantitative measurement replaced bedside empiricism. Diagnosis shifted from subjective interpretation to objective visualization—of tissues, cells, and later microbes. Medicine thus entered what Bruno Latour (1988) [22] calls the "laboratory life," where truth was produced through instrumentation and replication rather than narrative and trust.

The decisive conceptual breakthrough came with the germ theory of disease. Louis Pasteur's experiments on fermentation (1857–1863) and Robert Koch's identification of the anthrax bacillus (1876) and tuberculosis bacterium (1882) established microorganisms as specific causal agents. Koch's postulates provided the gold standard of causal inference in pathology (Bynum, 2008) [7]. Disease was no longer a disturbance of equilibrium but an invasion by discrete entities—a mechanistic and externalized notion of illness that fit perfectly within positivist epistemology. The germ theory catalyzed sweeping public-health reforms: sanitary engineering, vaccination campaigns, and epidemiological surveillance. It also reinforced confidence in scientific control—if microbes caused disease, then eradication was a technical problem solvable by chemistry, surgery, or hygiene (Rosenberg, 2021) [29]. The later discovery of antibiotics—penicillin by Fleming in 1928, mass-produced during World War II—appeared to confirm this technological optimism (Hoff, 2012) [18]. For a time, medicine seemed capable of mastering all pathology.

The scientization of medicine required institutional embodiment. Medical education shifted from apprenticeship to university-based training grounded in laboratory science. The 1910 Flexner Report in the United States standardized curricula around anatomy, physiology, pathology, and chemistry, establishing research universities as gatekeepers of medical authority (Bonner, 1995) [5]. Hospitals, once charitable refuges, became centers of research, diagnosis, and professional hierarchy. Simultaneously, the modern state absorbed health into its administrative apparatus. The British Public Health Act (1848) and the German and American systems of social insurance integrated medicine with governance. By the mid-twentieth century, national health services institutionalized the notion that citizens had a right to scientifically managed care (Hoff, 2012) [18]. Medicine thus evolved from private healing to a cornerstone of the welfare state—a transformation that redefined health management as both a scientific and political enterprise.

The Formation and Logic of the Biomedical Model

The biomedical model crystallized from the convergence of nineteenth-century physiology, bacteriology, and clinical epidemiology. Its epistemology rests on three assumptions (Engel, 1977; Brody, 2003) [6, 13]:

1. Disease as physiological abnormality: health equals the normal functioning of biological mechanisms; pathology is a measurable deviation.
2. Therapeutic repair as the medical mission: the physician's task is to identify and correct malfunction through intervention.
3. Objectivity and quantification as methodological ideals: truth resides in measurable data, not subjective experience.

These premises produced a powerful and coherent framework. As Huber *et al.* (2011) [19] remark, the biomedical model succeeded because it provided clear operational definitions and reproducible protocols—qualities indispensable for modern clinical practice and health policy. Yet they also narrowed medicine's epistemic field to what could be quantified.

Biomedical reasoning is inherently reductionist: complex living systems are analyzed through their smallest measurable components. Virchow's cellular pathology reduced disease to aberrations at the cellular level, while twentieth-century molecular biology extended this reduction to genes and proteins. The guiding metaphor was mechanical repair—the body as machine, the physician as engineer (Rosenberg, 2021) [29]. This mechanistic vision delivered extraordinary technical results. Vaccines, antibiotics, imaging, and organ transplantation transformed survival and longevity. However, it also marginalized non-biological determinants of health such as behavior, culture, and socioeconomic inequality (Farmer, 2003) [14]. In the language of the philosopher Canguilhem (1978) [8], medicine began to treat the "normal" and the "pathological" as purely statistical categories, detaching them from subjective and social meaning.

Michel Foucault's The Birth of the Clinic (1973) [15] described how the modern "clinical gaze" objectified the patient, translating suffering into signs and measurements. The physician's authority derived from access to diagnostic technologies that rendered the interior of the body visible and controllable. Stethoscopes, thermometers, and later X-rays and MRI scanners exemplified the triumph of objectivity. Interventionism naturally followed. If disease resided in identifiable lesions or pathogens, active manipulation—pharmaceutical, surgical, or technological—became the ethical imperative. Natural healing was reinterpreted as passivity. The moral identity of the physician shifted from compassionate companion to expert technician, a transformation that continues to shape doctor–patient relations today (Greene, 2018) [16].

By the mid-twentieth century, the biomedical model had become globally hegemonic. Through colonial medicine, international health agencies, and postwar reconstruction, Western scientific norms diffused worldwide (Packard, 2016) [27]. Medical curricula from London to Tokyo reproduced the same anatomy atlases and laboratory methods. The promise of scientific universality marginalized indigenous and alternative healing systems, branding them "unscientific."

This hegemony also structured public expectations: health became a matter of consumption of medical services; disease a technical malfunction to be fixed. Governments adopted epidemiological indicators and cost-effectiveness metrics as proxies for well-being, embedding biomedical rationality into bureaucratic governance (Whitaker, 2009) [31]. Despite these achievements, cracks appeared by the late twentieth century. The epidemiological transition from infectious to chronic diseases exposed the limits of acute, repair-oriented medicine. Psychological distress, lifestyle disorders, and social inequality eluded purely biological solutions, prompting renewed interest in holistic paradigms.

From Disease Treatment to Health Management

The biomedical model unintentionally paved the way for modern health management by introducing the concept of measurable risk. Once diseases were linked to quantifiable causes, it became possible to predict and prevent them. Epidemiology evolved from describing epidemics to analyzing probabilistic associations between behaviors and outcomes—smoking and lung cancer, diet and cardiovascular disease (Porter, 1997) [28]. This shift transformed the object of medicine from illness to risk itself. As Armstrong (1995) [1] argues, medicine moved "beyond the sick body" to govern entire populations through surveillance, screening, and education. Health management thus emerged as a form of biopolitical control: individuals were urged to monitor themselves, while states institutionalized programs of vaccination, sanitation, and chronic-disease prevention.

Three interlinked domains structure the modern health-management system. Public campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries promoted cleanliness, temperance, and exercise as civic virtues (Duffy, 1990) [12]. By the postwar era, behavioral medicine reframed these as evidence-based "health behaviors," measurable and modifiable through education and incentives. The establishment of municipal sanitation boards, epidemiological laboratories, and national health departments professionalized disease prevention. The twentieth century's great victories—smallpox eradication, polio vaccination, and reduced infant mortality—depended on the integration of biomedical science with public administration (Rosenberg, 2021) [29]. Following Britain's National Health Service (1948) and Germany's social insurance model, access to scientifically standardized care became a social right. These institutions redefined citizenship as participation in a managed health system—a profound moral as well as administrative innovation (Hoff, 2012) [18].

The success of biomedical technology fostered a social ethos of control. Scientific progress promised mastery over mortality itself; health became a project of perpetual optimization. Fitness tracking, genetic testing, and algorithmic diagnostics extend this logic into everyday life (Greenhalgh, 2023) [17]. While empowering, this technocratic rationality risks transforming health into a moral obligation and illness into personal failure. The "healthism" described by Crawford (1980) [11] reflects this cultural shift: citizens internalize biomedical norms and self-regulate according to expert standards. Health management thus becomes not merely a medical practice but a moral discipline embedded in consumer culture and digital governance.

Critical Reflections: Limits of the Biomedical Paradigm

Despite its achievements, the biomedical model's reductionism obscures the multidimensional nature of health. Chronic diseases such as diabetes, depression, and cardiovascular disorders cannot be explained solely by molecular dysfunction. Psychosocial stress, inequality, and environmental factors play decisive roles (Marmot, 2015) [24]. Yet these remain peripheral in systems organized around biological causation. George Engel's (1977) [13] call for a biopsychosocial model sought to re-integrate these dimensions, but institutional inertia and technological investment have slowed change. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly illustrated the need for systemic perspectives that link viral biology with social vulnerability, misinformation, and political trust (Biehl & Moran-Thomas, 2020) [3].

The cultural authority of technology encourages over-diagnosis and over-treatment. Antibiotic resistance, iatrogenic illness, and medicalization of normal life stages exemplify the unintended consequences of excessive intervention (Conrad, 2005) [10]. Procedures once reserved for pathology—cesarean section, psychopharmacology, cosmetic surgery—now address social or existential discomforts. Such trends reflect what Illich (1976) [20] termed "iatrogenic society," where medicine's expansion produces dependency and alienation. Restoring proportionality requires re-embedding medicine within ethical reflection and community context rather than technological escalation alone.

Biomedical universality often masks structural inequities. Global health initiatives driven by Western scientific norms may disregard local cultures and economic realities, reproducing colonial hierarchies under the guise of evidence-based policy (Farmer, 2003; Packard, 2016) [14, 27]. Within nations, socioeconomic gradients in access and outcomes persist despite universal systems (Marmot, 2015) [24]. Addressing these disparities demands an expanded conception of health that recognizes social justice as intrinsic, not peripheral, to health management. Cultural humility, participatory design, and transdisciplinary collaboration are emerging as correctives (Greenhalgh, 2023) [17].

Toward Integrative and Humanistic Paradigms

Recent decades have witnessed a gradual epistemic reorientation. The World Health Organization's definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being" (WHO, 1948) [33] has regained traction through contemporary holistic models. The biopsychosocial framework, systems medicine, and planetary health approaches all emphasize interdependence between biological, psychological, social, and ecological systems (Whitmee *et al*., 2015) [32].

These paradigms shift the focus from disease control to capacity building—resilience, adaptation, and meaning. Health management, in this view, becomes a continuous negotiation between individuals and their environments rather than a battle against discrete pathogens. Parallel to scientific expansion, the medical humanities have sought to restore the human dimension of care. Narrative medicine, ethics, and history cultivate empathy and critical reflection among practitioners (Charon, 2006) [9]. Integrating these disciplines into medical education counters the depersonalization of the clinical encounter and reaffirms the

moral foundations of healing. In organizational contexts, humanistic health management emphasizes dignity, communication, and cultural competence. Studies show that such approaches improve patient satisfaction and reduce burnout among health professionals (Kleinman, 2020) [21].

The twenty-first century faces dual challenges: personalized medicine driven by genomics and artificial intelligence, and global crises—pandemics, climate change, migration—that demand collective responses. Reconciling these requires a dual ethic: respect for individual uniqueness and commitment to collective equity. An integrative paradigm thus combines precision with compassion: leveraging data for personalized prevention while embedding it in ethical, cultural, and ecological awareness. The future of health management depends on sustaining this delicate balance (Lu, 2022) [23].

Conclusion

The scientization of Western medicine constitutes one of the most profound transformations in human intellectual history. Emerging from the philosophical foundations of ancient Greece and the empirical traditions of medieval practice, medicine's alignment with experimental science in the nineteenth century redefined health as a measurable, controllable, and politically governed domain. The biomedical model that arose from this process provided extraordinary successes—eradication of infectious diseases, increased longevity, and unprecedented technological mastery. Yet its very strengths generated a new pathology: the fragmentation of the human person, the depersonalization of care, and the neglect of social and moral dimensions of health.

This study has traced how these epistemic and institutional shifts reoriented the logic of health management from moral harmony to mechanical control, from community healing to bureaucratic governance. The medicalization of life transformed citizens into subjects of surveillance, patients into data points, and physicians into technicians (OpenAI, 2023) [26]. Nonetheless, as Engel, Farmer, and Huber have shown, the limitations of this model—reductionism, technologism, and inequality—have provoked new paradigmatic experiments. The biopsychosocial, ecological, and humanistic frameworks now emerging do not reject scientific medicine; rather, they seek to reintegrate it within the broader human condition.

The future of health management thus depends on balancing scientific rigor with humanistic wisdom. In an era of digital medicine and planetary crises, health can no longer be defined solely by physiological normality but must encompass psychological resilience, social justice, and ecological sustainability. Reconnecting the empirical with the ethical—the laboratory with the lived world—will be the defining challenge of twenty-first-century medicine. Only by restoring this integration can we move from a paradigm of control to one of care, from the mechanization of life to the cultivation of human flourishing.

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