

Doctor-historian dissects 1800's medical care



Bob LaPerriere's talk on historical medical care is a bit graphic.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

CAMP RICHARDSON – Saws and drills that look like they belong in woodshop, medication with no known benefits, prescriptions for maggots. This is what medical care was like in the 1800s.

Bob LaPerriere, a retired medical doctor and historian, shared stories this month about life during the Gold Rush era in terms of health care. He is the curator of the Museum of Medical History of the Sierra Sacramento Valley Medical Society. That medical society, which is the oldest one in the state, covers El Dorado, Sacramento and Yolo counties.

This was a time when doctors treated the patient because they didn't know the cause of the disease.

Bleeding, vomiting, blistering and purging were four the main

ways to help relieve someone of their symptoms – at least that is what was believed at the time. Leeches were one way to get people to bleed. A sharp, knife-like instrument called a fleam was another.

With immunizations not yet created and living conditions at times substandard based on today's regulations, childhood diseases were the norm. Measles was common.

"Surgery was pretty primitive," LaPerriere told the packed room at Camp Richardson Lodge. The talk was put on by the Lake Tahoe Historical Society. "The most common operation was amputation."

Gastrointestinal issues were the No. 1 complaint for people heading West on wagon trains. Contaminated water was common.

Even once they reached California the once pristine area was ravaged by the gold miners. Human sewage polluted the streets and drinking water. As LaPerriere said, "Sanitation was a luxury."

Anesthetics were rare. Ether wasn't introduced until after 1846.

Prior to the 1900s it was arsenic and strychnine that were the medications of choice. Then came mercury and narcotics.

Chinese herbalists were practicing as well. They are credited with saving the life Jane Stanford, the wife of then-Gov. Leland Stanford.

One of the worst things to strike the Sacramento area was the cholera epidemic of 1850. It hit all classes, killing nearly 1,000 people in three weeks and by some estimates 5,000 in total. Of the 50 doctors in the area at the time, 17 died from the disease.

At the museum in Sacramento is the original X-ray tube that came to Sacramento in about 1900. Also on display is an iron

lung used for polio patients.