**Q6 ‘There was little progress in medicine in Britain during the Renaissance period (c1500-1700).’ How far do you agree? Explain your answer.**

*I disagree with the statement that there was little progress in medicine during the Renaissance period. The criteria that led me to this judgment is the extent to which the discoveries and developments of this period had a long term impact on human understanding of medicine.*

*Firstly, it can be argued that there was little progress in medicine during the Renaissance period because public health did not improve. In order to judge that progress has been made there would need to be evidence that people in the Renaissance were healthier than their predecessors. The statement is accurate because there was no improvement in average life expectancy when compared to the medieval period which preceded it.*

*Secondly, ideas about cause of disease were still dominated by inaccurate belief in miasma and the continued acceptance of the four humours as a theory. It is true that as the importance of the church declined this was a period of pivotal change in terms of searching for new ideas about medicine yet these ideas were slow to be accepted and had no direct use in improving treatment or preventing disease. For all the exciting new experimentation, the discoveries of Vesalius and Harvey had little impact in improving understanding of the causes of disease.*

*Finally, medical care progress was limited as training continued to be based on learning from textbooks rather than practical experience. A good example was dissection; where despite its legalisation it took until after the Renaissance for the practice to become commonplace. As a result of the slow adoption of new ideas bloodletting and purging continued to be a widespread practice throughout the period. The response to the Great Plague of 1665 illustrates the lack of progress in medicine as neither old ideas such as prayer and fasting or new ideas like the theory of transference had any basis in medical fact for dealing with the epidemic.*

*However, it can be argued that the Renaissance was a period of fundamental change in medicine where major progress was achieved. For example, ideas about causation progressed from an acceptance of religious ideas to a wide rejection of supernatural explanations and the popularity of rational theories such as seeds in the air. The decline in church control over medical research and the embrace of scientific approaches in itself represents significant progress. People were now searching for new explanations for disease rather than believing that disease was caused by God. Thomas Sydenham was a key figure in leading progression in understanding of causation as his promotion of direct observation and examination replaced astrology and urine charts for the purpose of diagnosis.*

*Furthermore, compared to the medieval period it was far easier to communicate medical discoveries and theories as a result of the invention of the printing press. For example, in 1665 the newly established Royal Society was able to publish a journal Philosophical Transactions in which scientists could share their work and ideas. This meant that doctors and scientists could study, challenge and build on each other’s research dramatically accelerating progress in medicine. A culture was created of scientific exploration with communication between practitioners enabling rapid development of understanding as demonstrated by Harvey’s discovery of blood circulation as a result of developing the research of Vesalius.*

*In addition, progress was also significant in treatment; apothecaries and surgeons now needed a licence which could only be gained by training and new ideas from scientists like Vesalius and Harvey were transmitted through books and inspired physicians to become more practical and experimental. For example, by 1700 Harvey’s work was being taught in medical schools and his methods of observation and dissection were copied by others. Galen’s ideas were now discredited and far less influential. The response to the Great Plague of 1665 provides evidence of progress in ideas of appropriate treatment and prevention. For example, streets were regularly cleaned, public gatherings were banned and infected households were quarantined for 28 days which had the effect of reducing the level of mass infection that was evident in 1348.*

*In conclusion, it is inaccurate to characterise the Renaissance as a period of little progress in medicine. Although the outdated beliefs and treatments such as miasma and bloodletting continued this can be countered by the fundamental changes in the culture of scientific exploration and experimentation through the establishment of Royal Society, the seismic impact of the printing press in communicating new discoveries and the integration of scientific discoveries into the training of medical practitioners. In summary, although there was limited evidence of measurable progress at the time, the Renaissance was a period of immense progress in human understanding of medicine.*