

## Lashley's Essentials of Clinical Genetics in Nursing Practice

St. Patrick's Day is here. A perfect time to brush up on your Brehon law!

Brehon, or breitheamh, is the Irish word for judge and Brehon laws are the body of Irish legal code dating from the early Celtic period. Passed down orally for centuries, they were transcribed for the first time in the seventh century. There's even a legend that Patrick himself had a hand in transcribing the laws earlier in the fifth century!

Sorry we can't give you any MCLE credit for reading, but we hope you enjoy this glimpse into ancient Ireland's earliest legal system.

#1 Don't do the crime if you can't pay the fine

Justice under the Brehons was based on a well-structured system of compensatory fines, known as érics. Fines were generally calculated from a combination of the crime's severity and the social ranks of the injured and guilty parties. This focus on arbitration and restorative justice covered everything from commercial law, criminal law, healthcare, the ownership of property, marital and family law, and equal rights.

#2 A jury of your steers

Cattle, pigs, and horses were all units of currency under Brehon law, with milk cows being most highly prized. One scholar wrote, "The cow was the measure of everything: it was the unit of value; the ultimate in poverty was the man with only one cow; the wealth of the richest consisted of vast herds of them." A formal exchange of cattle was also used to seal contractual agreements.

Many laws stipulate judgement in bovine terms, including this delightful and fair guideline: "For the best arable land, the price is 24 cows. The price for dry, coarse land is 12 dry cows." A forestry law levied a fine of 2 ½ cows (two cows and a heifer) for anyone found guilty of damaging protected trees.

#3 "To every cow belongs its calf"

With these words, King Diarmaid mac Cerbhiall, the High King of Ireland, settled an acrimonious dispute between two monks arguing over a copied manuscript by ruling in favor of the plaintiff. And with that, copyright law began its long journey from vellum (calfskin) to the digital age and beyond.

# 4 Justice of the bees

Along with cattle, the Brehons devoted much attention to the bee. Over twenty manuscript pages of laws governing beekeeping, honey production, and protection of bees survive.

According to Brehon law, "any bumble bee" ~bumbá'gá in Irish "taking nectar from plants on a neighbour's land could be accused of grazing trespass in the same way a cow or sheep would be if they strayed on to neighboring

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land.â€•

Bees are a little harder to fence in than cattle and sheep, so the law granted a beekeeper â€œthree years of freedom during which time his bees were allowed free reign but on the fourth year the first swarm to issue from the hive had to be given to the neighbor as payment.â€•

Bee stings were also covered. Victims were entitled to a meal of honey from the beeâ€™s keeper. If, however, they died as a result of the sting, two hives were paid in compensation to their family. This ruling was null and void, however, if the victim killed the bee in retaliation.

Moreover, if the bee-stung â€œvictimâ€• was found to have vandalized or disturbed the hive prior to the attack, the bees were considered justified and their keeper free from liability for any resulting injuries.

### # 5 Assault and poetry

Poets in ancient Ireland enjoyed many perks of social privilege, including wealth guaranteed by law. â€•The chief poet of the tribe earns twenty-one cows annually, plus enough pasture lands to feed them, plus two hounds and two horses.â€•

But with great cattle comes great responsibility. According to another Brehon law, a poet who overcharged for a poem could be stripped of half his rank in society. And if a poetâ€™s satire was harmful enough to cause bodily injury or death to its target, the penalty was the honor price equal to the harm done or life taken.

### # 6 Food court

Under Brehon Law, husbands could be fined if they failed to get a morsel of food for their pregnant wives when requested. Also, under Brehon Law, it was illegal to give somebody food that was found with a dead mouse or weasel. We can only hope that one didnâ€™t make it to the books as a case law!

### # 7 Rules of the Court

Judges in Brehon law had five guiding paths to judgement: truth, duty, right, propriety, and proper inquiries.

Lawyers were allotted time to plead their case according to their social standing or "dignity" and in determining the length of the speech allowed, they were advised to count eighteen breathings to the minute.

One famous Brehon lawyer was Brig Brethach (Brigit of the Judgements) also known as Brig Ambue the "cowless" or "propertyless", who served along with her father Sencha mac Ailella under King Conchobar mac Nessa. She is credited with several rulings that advanced women's rights, including a correction of one of her father's previous judgements.

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Delve further into the history of ancient Irish law in this paper from Dr. Noell Higgins, School of Law lecturer at Dublin City University, Ireland. But before you go: which Brehon law do you find the most just? Let us know in the comments below.

And Happy early St. Patrick's Day!

## Reference

[Methodological Issues and Strategies in Clinical Research](#)

[Ultrasound for Canine Pregnancy Scanning](#)