

## **Prehistoric medicine**

### **What does prehistoric mean?**

Prehistory is the period of time before man wrote things down.

### **So, if they didn't write things down how do we know what they did?**

There are a number of types of evidence that historians can use. Firstly, there are human remains from the era. Scientists can work out how long a body has been dead for and we can see what illnesses people had at the time. To work out what the beliefs were at the time, historians use a few things: prehistoric man left cave paintings that illustrate things, there are also remains of things like charms that were left in burial sites.

### **That's not much evidence, is there anything to substantiate this?**

We can also look at the way that Aborigines live their lives. The aboriginal people live in Australia and had no communication with the outside world until just over 200 years ago. They live a lifestyle that is thought to be very similar to that of prehistoric man. From analysis of their traditions we can verify some of the ideas that we get from the evidence in cave paintings and from burial sites.

### **So, what were their beliefs?**

Prehistoric man is thought to have believed that spirits were the cause of many illnesses. For example they believed that a person who was having a fit had been possessed by a spirit. Evidence to support this kind of theory is the number of charms that have been found at burial sites and the practices of the Aboriginal people.

### **But what about other kinds of illnesses, things like cuts, broken bones etc???**

Cuts and broken bones were treated in a more natural manner. Because the cause of the injury could be seen, the treatment would be based on common sense. So, for example, a cut would be covered up and broken bones were cased in a pot made from mud.

### **What about really serious things and operations?**

We know that prehistoric men successfully carried out some operations. One of these is trephining. This operation involves cutting a disk out of the skull of a persons head. Whilst we can't be 100% sure why they did this, we do know that people survived this type of operation - there is evidence of bone growth on skulls that have been operated on!