

## **Medicine in Medieval and Early Modern Europe**

Medicine during the Medieval period changed in a number of ways, often for the worse.

Medieval Europe was a place that placed less importance on the value of Public Health facilities. Through a lack of care, or a lack of ability to maintain the aqueducts et al built by the romans, medieval Europe became a place where medical practice was in places regressing rather than progressing.

It was over 400 years after the fall of the Roman Empire that Europe was again a place that was peaceful and relatively stable. Larger nations were beginning to emerge, such as Anglo-Saxon England, but Europe suffered from only being united by the Christian faith.

Little remained of the Roman era, only Latin, which was a universal language for the priesthood of the day. As a result there were a variety of different medical practices available to people in Medieval Times: they may have been treated by monks following the Hippocratic theory of the Four Humours, by apothecaries who specialised in herbal remedies or by doctors who made use of charms.

As the church taught that God sent illness, and that repenting would cure all evils, many people at the time believed that pilgrimage would cure them. Other theories were based upon astrology, the movement of the sun and stars.

Despite this disparate range of theories, there were many examples of good practice and advances were made. Most well trained doctors used Hippocrates teachings and diagnosis was developed, the use of Urine samples being a significant step forward. Even so, some 'physical' cures were administered for purely superstitious reasons: herbal remedies being prescribed as they would rid the body of evil spirits, for example.

### **Surgery during the Medieval Era**

During medieval times Surgery and knowledge of the Anatomy was developed as dissection was allowed. Doctors would, as part of their training, be lectured on the theories of Galen and often a dissection would form part of this teaching. However it was a demonstrator, rather than the doctor, who performed this and often mistakes would be made or inaccuracies blamed upon poor workmanship rather than ill-informed theories: meaning that for a long time the anatomical works of Galen and the Islamic physicians went unchallenged in Western Europe.

The age-old problem of unsuccessful surgery was however partially dealt with. Doctors recognised that infection and pain were the primary causes of death during surgery. To combat this they started to use wine as an antiseptic and drugs to ease pain. Surgery was still limited to the removal of cysts, cataracts and minor operations to cure wounds, a procedure which developed as a result of conflicts

(although each time doctors worked out how to remove a type of arrow head from the body a new type of arrow was introduced).

## **Changes in Medicine during the Medieval Era**

The earliest noticeable changes were in the training of doctors. In the 11th century a medical school was established at Salerno, in southern Italy. This school taught that the careful observation of patients was essential, that cleanliness was linked to good health and that balances of fluids within the body was of paramount importance.

Such was the importance of this school that The Holy Roman Emperor of the time, Frederick, decreed that from 121 only doctors trained at the school could work in the royal court. This meant that medical training, whilst only being of benefit to the wealthy, was given a greater importance, which consequentially results in improved training methods and the spread of knowledge. Soon other medical schools, such as the one in Montpellier, were opened.

By 1300 there were a dozen or so medical schools in Europe and whilst change and improvements were slow, they did happen. Dissection for example was permitted and the teachings of Hippocrates and Galen were questioned with some degree of success. New ideas such as Urine charts also resulted from this upsurge in medical training and method.

These changes didn't always spread throughout Europe and indeed most of them were only of real benefit to the rich. Ordinary people would have to rely upon traditional remedies passed on from generation to generation. Most couldn't afford to pay Doctor's as fees were high at the time. Medical care though did improve, and evidence exists of a growing number of surgeons and barber surgeons at the time. (Barber-Surgeons performed small operation such as the removal of teeth, they were mainly employed by the poor)

## **The Black Death**

The Black Death is the name given to a form of plague that spread across the northern hemisphere in the 14th century. The pestilence spread along trade routes from China into India and then Europe.

### **How did the Black Death spread?**

The Black Death is commonly described as being a form of the Plague. One form is spread virally, by people coughing out the germs, for example. Another form of the disease is spread by fleas. Infected fleas would pass the infection on to humans when they bit them. The latter of these is the explanation offered by most

historians, however this has been challenged in recent years by a number of scientists and historians.

### **What did people believe was the cause of the Black Death?**

In the 14th century many explanations were offered. These included explanations based on religion, astronomy and on simple common sense. This meant that some people thought the epidemic was the result of unholy behaviour; as a result of tolerance towards heretics or non-christians; by movements of the stars and planets or as a result of bad smells and miasma.

### **How did people try to prevent or cure the Black Death?**

The variety of beliefs about causes of the epidemic resulted in a wide range of preventative measures and attempted cures being used. These ranged from cleaning the streets, burning rubbish and lighting aromatic fires to tackle miasma through to prayer, flagellation and religious procession to please god.