

History, Medicine through time

Lesson 3 of 30

Worksheet:

How did people in medieval times try to prevent and cure diseases?

Mr Prudden



Religious treatments

The Church taught people that disease was sent by God as a punishment for **sin**. Therefore there were a number of religious treatments. For example, healing prayers and spells, paying for a special **mass** to be said and **fasting**.

Pilgrimages to the tombs of people noted for healing powers became very popular. Once there, pilgrims could touch holy relics, such as a piece of the 'true' cross on which Jesus was crucified, or the bones of a saint. They could present an offering, light a candle and of course they could pray to God to help heal their sickness.

Sometimes the sick were actually discouraged from seeking cures. After all, if God had sent the disease to punish you, it was important for the disease to run its course.



Humoural treatments - Phlebotomy

Physicians agreed with **Hippocrates** and **Galen** that illness was caused by an imbalance of the Four Humours. Therefore the preferred way to fight illness was to restore the balance. We call these **Humoural treatments**.

Phlebotomy, which means bloodletting or bleeding, was the most common treatment for this. The idea behind it was that bad humours could be removed from the body by removing some of the blood. Bleeding was carried out in several different ways...



Humoural treatments - Phlebotomy

1. Cutting a vein: This involved cutting a vein with a sharp instrument. Phlebotomy charts like *the vein man* were used to show points in the body where bleeding was recommended for specific illnesses.
2. Leeches: Freshwater leeches were collected and kept hungry for a day before being placed on the skin. Bleeding might continue for up to 10 hours. This was used for elderly and weak people where traditional bleeding was considered too dangerous.
3. **Cupping**: The skin was pierced with a sharp instrument until it was bleeding. A heated cup was placed over the cuts to create a vacuum which then drew blood out of the skin. This was usually used for women, children and the very old.



Humoural treatments - Purging

Because it was believed that the humours were created from the foods eaten, a common treatment was purging the digestive system to remove any leftover food. This was done by giving the patient either something to make them vomit (an emetic), or a laxative or enema to clear out anything left over in the body.

1. **Emetics**: These consisted of bitter herbs like aniseed and parsley to make the patient vomit.

2. **Laxatives**: Some examples included mallow leaves stewed in ale, and linseeds fried in hot fat. Linseeds are still used today as a digestive aid.

3. **Enema**: **John of Arderne**, a famous English surgeon, mixed water with honey, oil, wheat bran, soap and herbs. He would squirt it into the patient's anus using a greased pipe fixed to a pig's bladder, while the patient rubbed his stomach. This would clear out any stubborn blockages.



Humoural treatments - Herbal treatments

Sick people were also treated with remedies – usually herbal infusions to drink, sniff or bathe in. Some of them are still prescribed today. For example, **aloe vera** was prescribed to improve digestion.

A common remedy mixed and sold at this time was a **theriaca**. This was a spice-based mixture that could contain up to 70 ingredients including common ingredients like ginger and pepper.

Different foods were prescribed to encourage the balance of the humours, and warm baths were regularly prescribed to help the body draw in heat to help dissolve blockages in the humours. Various plants and herbs could be added to the bath water.



Medieval prevention - The Church

People believed the best, and most important, way of preventing disease was to lead a life free from **sin**. Regular prayers, confessions and offering **tithes** to the Church worked together to ensure that any minor sins were quickly forgiven.



Medieval prevention - Hygiene

The *Regimen Sanitatis* was a set of instructions provided by **physicians** to help a patient maintain good health. It first appeared in the work of **Hippocrates** where it was later picked up by **Galen**. A lot of the advice is familiar to us today. For example, take moderate exercise, do not overeat, make sure you get enough sleep and keep clean.

Public baths were available for free. Poorer people swam in rivers to keep themselves fresh.

Everybody washed their hands before and usually after every meal. They believed that cleanliness was next to godliness, so it was important to stay clean.

Also, medieval people tried to make sure their homes smelled sweet and fresh. Floors were regularly swept and rushes mixed with sweet-smelling herbs which were laid down to soak up any mess.



Medieval prevention - Purifying the air

Medieval people attempted to keep the air free from *miasma* by purifying it. They did this by spreading sweet herbs, such as lavender.

Sometimes this might be carried as a bunch of flowers (**posy**), or placed inside a decorative piece of jewellery called a **pomander** (a large locket which would be worn around the waist).

Local authorities also tried to tackle miasma outside the home by putting into place measures to keep towns clean. For example, they tried to make sure there were not rotting animals left lying around and pulled down very smelly public toilets.



Glossary

- **Fasting** When you choose not to eat or drink, usually as a religious observance
- **Humoural treatment** A treatment intended to restore the balance of the four humours
- **Mass** Roman Catholic service where bread and wine is given. Catholics believe that this involves a miracle: the bread and wine is turned into the body and blood of Christ.
- **Miasma** Bad smells were believed to cause disease



Glossary

- **Physician** Someone who practices medicine like a modern doctor.
- **Pilgrimage** A journey to an important religious monument, shrine or place.
- **Sin** An immoral act considered to be an offence to God.
- **Tithe** A church tax when people had to give one tenth of their annual produce or earnings to the Church.



Comprehension Questions

1. Why were medieval people bled?
2. What was the Regimen Sanitatis and how did it help a patient maintain good health?
3. How did medieval people act to prevent miasma causing illness?
4. How did the Church influence medieval treatment and prevention?
5. Challenge question: How far do you agree that medical advice about treatment and prevention has improved a lot since medieval times?

