

History, Medicine through time

Lesson 18 of 30

## **Worksheet:**

# **How and why did ideas about responsibility for public health change?**

Mr Prudden



# Government intervention in public health, 1250-1800

In medieval Britain, governments prioritised fighting wars, defending their people during wartime and punishing lawbreakers who threatened the peace in the country. This meant the job of keeping the people and towns healthy was assigned to local councils. However, with most money going on war and defence, there was precious little money left for this.

In the Renaissance times, governments still did not spend money on trying to improve people's health or finding out more about medicine, apart from when there was a major outbreak of plague. For example, in 1665 the government were proactive in preventing the plague spreading, for example they banned public meetings, fairs and funerals, and appointed **searchers** and **wardens** to measure the spread of the disease.



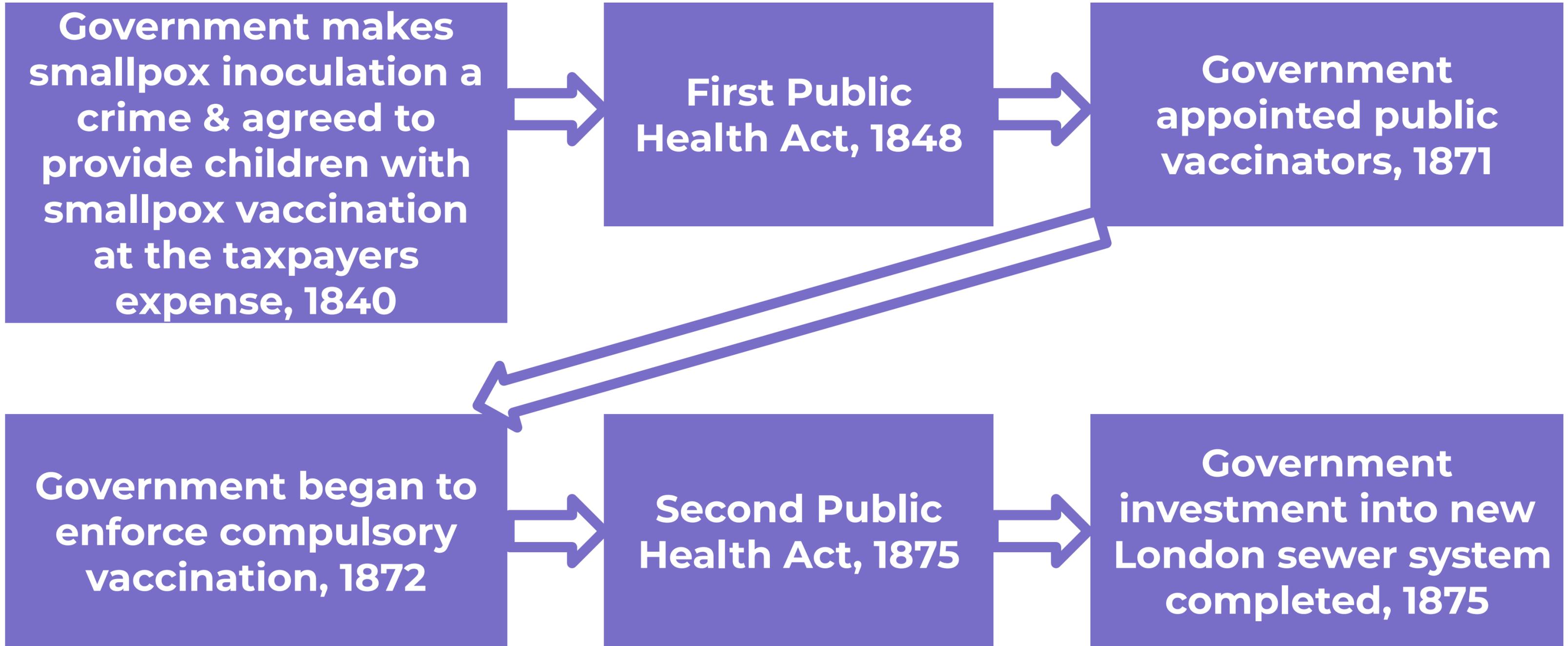
# Government intervention in public health, 1800-1900

By 1800, the government still had little interest in spending money on improving people's health and conditions in towns and cities. They had a **laissez faire** attitude. This is a French term and it means 'leave be'. We use it to describe governments who don't get involved in day-to-day lives of their population. Indeed, the government in 1800 believed it wasn't their responsibility to interfere in the way the people lived – if people were unhealthy, that was their problem!

But in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as you can see on the next page, the government was actively making laws to improve people's health, forcing changes on people. Why was there a U-turn in government approach?



# 1800-1900



**Why was there a U-turn in government approach by the 1870s?**



## The first Public Health Act, 1848

In 1842, **Edwin Chadwick** reported to the government the effects of **malnourishment** and poor **sanitary** conditions on people. For example, he concluded that in rural areas the average age of death was 38, yet in cities like Liverpool, the average age of death for workers was only 15!

Six years later the government sort of took action by introducing the **first Public Health Act** which encouraged cities to set up boards of health and provide clean water supplies. However, it “encouraged” and “recommended” local councils to take action but it was not compulsory. This meant it had very little impact.

The **first Public Health Act** came before **Louis Pasteur** published his **germ theory** in **1861**. There was no scientific evidence in 1848 to help persuade politicians to enforce public health changes.



## Joseph Bazalgette's modern sewer system

**John Snow's** report to the government in 1855, that cholera was transmitted by dirty drinking water, was rejected by the government because it was before **Pasteur** published his **germ theory** – politicians simply could not begin to understand why the water was causing **cholera**. His recommendation that new sewers needed building would also prove costly which the government was not prepared to pay the expense for with no scientific proof to back-up the need for them.

When the government did invest in **Joseph Bazalgette** to modernise the London sewer system, this was not because of **Snow**. It was because of the very hot and dry summer in 1858 which had caused '**The Great Stink**'. The Thames was low and the stench from the exposed sewage on the river banks persuaded the government that something needed to be done.



# Joseph Bazalgette's modern sewer system

This project used engineering methods not available a hundred years earlier such as machinery powered by steam engines. In total, 83 miles of main sewers, 1,100 miles of connecting sewers, and pumping stations to drive the flow of sewage along the pipes were built.

The modernised sewer system was completed by 1875.



London Sewage system being built in 1860, unknown author, Wikimedia Commons



## The second Public Health Act, 1875

From the 1860s, the government began to take more action to improve the living conditions for people in cities. For example, in Birmingham **slums** were demolished.

Then the government passed the **second Public Health Act** in 1875. This provided city authorities with compulsory rules all had to adhere to. A list of the rules can be found on the next slide.

The fact that there were no further **cholera** epidemics shows that the **second Public Health Act** had its intended impact. Further evidence of success: In 1868 there were 716 deaths from **typhus** in London, by 1885 just 28 and by 1900 there were none.



# The second Public Health Act, 1875

All city authorities had to :

- Provide clean water to stop diseases that were spread in dirty water.
- Dispose of sewage to prevent drinking water and washing water from becoming polluted.
- Build public toilets to avoid pollution.
- Employ a **public officer of health** to monitor outbreaks of disease.
- Ensure new houses were of better quality, to stop damp and overcrowding.
- Provide public parks for exercise.
- Create street lighting to prevent accidents.
- Check the quality of food in shops to make sure that it didn't contain anything that could cause harm to people. For example, some bakers mixed chalk into flour to make bread whiter!



# Why was the government getting more involved?

1. **'The Great Stink'** of 1858 gave the government some impetus to improve the sewer systems in London. But this on its own is not enough to give a sufficient explanation for why the government took more direct action in the final quarter of the 19th century...
2. In **1861 Pasteur** proved that there was a scientific link between dirt and disease. **Snow** had been correct in his arguments but he did not know that it was **bacteria** in the water that spread **cholera**. Because of **Pasteur**, the theory that illness was caused by bad air (**miasma**) finally faded away. In the 1870s and 1880s **Robert Koch** identified individual **bacteria**, for example the cholera **bacteria** in 1883. Faced with scientific proof, the government were more willing to fund public health reforms.



## Why was the government getting more involved?

3. In **1867** working men in towns were given the right to vote for the first time. This meant the number of votes doubled. The numbers increased again in 1884 when many working men in the country areas got the vote. If politicians wanted to win elections, they now had to promise laws to win the votes of working men, not just the wealthy. The 1870s and 1880s saw many new laws passed (like the **second Public Reform Act** in 1875) designed to improve the lives of ordinary people.

By 1900, there had been a major shift in the role of government with regards to public health. The **laissez-faire** attitude had been replaced by an acceptance that it was the role of the government to ensure people live healthy lives. This government involvement in the health of the people would continue into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.



# Glossary

- **Bacteria** A tiny living organism, too small to be seen by the naked eye, which causes disease.
- **Cholera** An infectious and often fatal bacterial disease usually contracted from infected water supplies and causing severe vomiting and diarrhoea.
- **Germ theory** The theory that germs (micro-organisms) cause disease, often by infection through the air.
- **Laissez Faire** A French term which means 'leave be'. We use it to describe governments who don't get involved in day-to-day lives of their population.



# Glossary

- **Malnourishment** A lack of proper nutrition, caused by not having enough to eat or eating enough of the right things.
- **Sanitary** Hygienic and clean. Something that is unhygienic and dirty is **unsanitary**.
- **Slums** A squalid and overcrowded urban street or district inhabited by very poor people.
- **Typhus** An infectious disease transmitted by lice, ticks, mites, and rat fleas.



# Comprehension Questions

1. Why did the first Public Health Act have only a limited impact?
2. Why did the government invest in Joseph Bazalgette to modernise the London sewer system
3. Can you explain three reasons why the second Public Health Act improved the health of the people?
4. Why did the events of 1861 and 1867 lead to the second Public Health Act?
5. Challenge question: How far do you agree that Pasteur's germ theory was the most important reason why the British government's **laissez faire** attitude came to an end?

**You may want to use the following sentence starters and hints to help you.**

*In some ways Pasteur's germ theory was the most important reason. For example...*

*However, other reasons were also important. For example...*

*Overall, I mostly agree that...*

