

History, Medicine through time

Lesson 15 of 30

Worksheet:

How did approaches differ in dealing with the Great Plague compared to the Black Death?

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What was the Great Plague?

In 1665, plague swept across the whole of England.

It lasted from June until November, the peak of infection being September when 7,000 deaths from the disease were recorded in one week. 100,000 Londoners died - 25% of the London population.

As with the Black Death, the Great Plague of 1665 was an outbreak of the **bubonic plague**. The bacteria was spread by flea bites. The main symptom was **buboes**, which were swellings in the armpit or groin, filled with pus.

Once caught, you were usually dead in 3 to 5 days.



Ideas about the causes of the Great Plague

Ideas about the cause of plague had not progressed since the Black Death in 1348.

Fewer people believed in **the Theory of the Humours** by 1665 but it had not been replaced with a proven alternative.

Many people believed the Great Plague was a result of mankind's wickedness and that God had sent it to punish and cleanse his kingdom.

The most popular theory about the spread of the Great Plague in 1665 was that it was caused by **miasma**. They believed that **miasma** was created by stinking rubbish and dunghills in towns and cities. This fitted the pattern for when plague occurred: plague outbreaks generally happened when it was warm and smelly.



Approaches to treatment

Treatments for the Great Plague were very similar to those used against the Black Death:

- People prayed for the sick.
- People had their **buboes** lanced to let the pus out.
- **Physicians** may have tried **humoural treatments**, such as **bleeding** and **purgings**, if the sick lived long enough.
- And recipes for herbal medicines and **poultices** continued to be popular.



Approaches to treatment

New approaches to treatment included wrapping patients in thick woollen cloths and laid by a fire so they could sweat the disease out.

Transference was attempted as well. People in 1665 believed that an illness or disease could be transferred from one person to something else. So during the Great Plague victims strapped a live chicken to a **bubo**, or lanced it with a feather plucked from a chicken. The intention was to transfer the poison from the patient to the chicken or its feather so that they recovered.

Another development in 1665 was the presence of **Quack doctors**. These were people who did not have any medical qualifications but sold their services as a **physician** or **apothecary**, and many **Quack doctors** took advantage of the panic. They mixed medicines and advertised them as wonder cures hoping to make lots of money!



Approaches to prevention: Government action

The government in 1665 was far more proactive in combating the spread of the Great Plague than they had been back in 1348. In London, measures were taken to **quarantine** anybody who had the plague.

Searchers were employed to go from house to house checking to see if there were any plague victims.

Houses containing plague victims were quarantined for **28 days** and the door painted with the red cross, with the words 'Lord have mercy on us' painted with red. **Watchmen** stood guard to stop anyone going in or out. To help those **quarantined**, Parish officials were charged with bringing them food. During the Black Death of 1348, people new to an area had to stay away from everybody else for 40 days to ensure they were not carrying the disease. So during both plagues **quarantine** measures were put into place to try to prevent the spread of the plague.



Approaches to prevention: Government action

Some victims were taken to specially built **pest houses** away from the crowded parts of the city.

Large carts would daily travel through the city of London to collect the corpses. The corpses were buried in mass graves at least six feet deep.

No strangers were allowed into the city without a **certificate of health**.

All stray cats and dogs were caught and killed by newly-appointed **dog-killers**. Around 40,000 dogs and 200,000 cats were killed because it was thought that these helped to spread the disease.



Approaches to prevention: Government action

All public entertainment and public gatherings were stopped, for example fairs, theatres, **bear-baitings** and games. This was to prevent the assembly of large crowds which might spread plague.

King Charles II and his government ordered days of public prayers and **fasting** on Wednesdays and Fridays so that people could publicly confess their sins and beg God to be merciful. The King during the Black Death in 1348 had also ordered more church services, one every day.

The King and his government also suggested changing diets, for example a diet heavy with garlic and sage.



Approaches to prevention: Miasma

People, like in 1348, were encouraged to carry a **pomander** to drive away the miasma. A **pomander** was a ball containing perfumed substances.

New methods of warding off *miasma* were used in 1665: Smoking tobacco was encouraged, rubbish was routinely cleared from the streets, and householders were ordered to sweep the street outside their doors every day and wash down the area twice a day to prevent dirt building up. Barrels of tar and bonfires were also lit in the streets, to drive away 'bad' air.

Bodies were buried after dark, and not in churches or churchyards.



Approaches to prevention: *Miasma*

Plague doctors wore special costumes to avoid catching the plague from their patients.

They had hooked, birdlike masks, with sweet-smelling herbs to ward off the *miasma*.

Birds were believed to attract disease, so the idea was that the disease might be attracted by the bird shape and leave the patient.

Also, the physician's cloak was coated in wax to make sure patient blood and pus could not soak into it.



Approaches to prevention: Other methods

Like during the Black Death, many people believed the best way to avoid the Great Plague was to run away.

Some people deliberately got themselves infected with **syphilis** because they believed this prevented them from getting the plague.

The village of **Eyam** quarantined itself to stop the disease from spreading. Food was brought over by residents of nearby villages and left at the edge of the village on stones. The villagers left money in a trough of vinegar to make sure that they did not spread the Great Plague via the money. This quarantine worked and the plague did not spread to the nearby villages.



The end of the Great Plague

It was the cold winter weather which helped bring the plague to a close.

In London, together with the cold weather, **the Great Fire of London** in 1666 finished off the last remnants of the plague in the city.

Most of London was destroyed by the fire and had to be completely rebuilt. Unhealthy narrow streets and wooden buildings were replaced by stone and brick buildings, and wider, better-paved streets.

For a time London was therefore healthier, but as the city became crowded again, the benefits of the rebuilding disappeared.



Glossary

- **Bear baiting** A sport where a bear would be chained to a post and dogs unleashed against it. Large sums of money would be gambled on the outcome.
- **Bubonic plague** Plague characterized by fever and the formation of buboes.
- **Fasting** When you choose not to eat or drink, usually as a religious observance.
- **Four humours** The belief that the body contained four humours of liquids - blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. The **Theory of the Four Humours** claimed you needed an equal balance of each humour to remain healthy, and treatments to achieve equal balance are called **Humoural treatments.**



Glossary

- **Miasma** Bad smells were believed to cause disease.
- **Pest houses** A new type of hospital that only catered for people suffering from plague or pox.
- **Poultice** A soft, moist mass of material, usually consisting of herbs. It is applied to the body to relieve soreness and kept in place with a cloth.
- **Quarantine** To separate from the rest of the local population because of illness.
- **Syphilis** A sexually transmitted disease that was common from the late fifteenth century.



Comprehension Questions

1. Can you describe three ways people attempted to treat the plague in 1348 and 1665?
2. What was a Quack Doctor and what did they do during the Great Plague?
3. How did the following help to prevent the spreading of the plague?
a) Searchers b) Watchmen c) Dog-killers d) Plague doctors
4. Can you describe three ways people attempted to drive away *miasma* to prevent themselves catching the plague?
5. Challenge question: Can you describe three changes and three continuities between people's reactions to the Black Death and the Great Plague? ***Hint: For people's reactions this question is asking you to think about what actions people took to treat and or prevent getting the plague.***



Extension task

Does the Great Plague suggest there was medical progress in the years 1500-1700?

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

*In some ways the Great Plague suggests there was medical progress in the years 1500-1700. For example... **[Hint - Government actions]***

*However, in other ways the Great Plague suggests there wasn't medical progress in the years 1500-1700. For example... **[Hint - Type of treatments]***

Overall, I mostly agree that...

