

History, Medicine through time

Lesson 14 of 30

Worksheet:

Did ideas about prevention and treatment change between 1500-1700?

Mr Prudden



Continuity - Treatment

Although the power of the Church was reduced in Renaissance times, people did still believe that prayer could treat illness and disease.

People in Renaissance Britain still believed that it was important to rebalance the **four humours**. Therefore the **humoural treatments** used in medieval times, **bleeding** and **purgings**, continued.

Herbal remedies also remained popular and most sick people continued to be cared for at home.



Continuity - Medical healers

Physicians still trained at universities and, as in medieval Britain, their learning was still from books and not from practical experience. However, they did begin to challenge the old teachings and investigate for themselves.

Physicians were still expensive meaning most were unable to afford their services, so most people used **apothecaries** and **barber surgeons** and/or relied on women in their local community to offer them advice and remedies. **Apothecaries** continued to mix remedies and **barber surgeons** continued to carry out simple operations as they had done in medieval Britain.

Most people still continued to be cared for at home. Women still played a key role in the local community as well, giving advice and even mixing remedies.



Continuity - Prevention

People still believed prayer could prevent illness and disease.

People in Renaissance times continued to avoid catching diseases by following the *regimen sanitatis*. For example, to avoid exhaustion and rich or fatty foods.

People in Renaissance times still clung to the idea of bad air (or *Miasma*) causing sickness, so keeping clean was still seen as a key away to avoid getting sick. As such, more steps were taken to remove *miasma* from the air. For example, removing sewage and picking up rubbish from the streets. Another example, people now kept clean by changing their clothes more often.



Change- Treatment

Transference was a new theory in Renaissance times. People believed that an illness or disease could be transferred from one person to something else. For example, people believed that you could get rid of a wart by rubbing it with an onion - the wart would then transfer to the onion!

As well as herbal remedies, treatments were often chosen because of their colour. For example, if you suffered from **jaundice** then your skin turns yellow. Therefore yellow saffron would be used to treat it. Another example, smallpox gave you a red rash, so it was believed drinking red wine or eating red foods would cure you.

New herbal remedies appeared in Britain because of exploration to the **New World**. For example, **ipecacuanha** from Brazil (later known as ipecac) became an effective cure for **dysentery**. Another example, **Peruvian bark** successfully treated **malaria**.



Change- Treatment

More people were writing down home remedies because more people could read and write. For example, **Mary Doggett** wrote down a a remedy for **scurvy** which included orange juice. We know that **scurvy** is caused by a deficiency in Vitamin C, which is found in oranges. Although **Mary Doggett** did not know this, she knew her remedy worked.

People also began to look for **chemical cures**. For example, in small doses antimony causes sweating which fitted in with the idea of **purging** the body of disease. It was also drunk to encourage vomiting, another type of **purging**. Another example, **mercury** was used to treat **syphilis**. Both of these chemicals are poisonous!

People visited the King's court believing that if **Charles II** touched them they would be cured of **scrofula**, a skin disease known as **the King's Evil**. The King was believed to be God's representative on earth so being touched by him was as close as you could get to being touched by God.



Change- Medical healers

In Renaissance times, **physicians** began to challenge the old teachings because of the following reasons:

1. **Dissection** was, unlike in medieval Britain, now legal due to the decline in the power of the Church. However, it was still difficult to get hold of fresh corpses to dissect and most universities didn't have an **anatomy** theatre...
2. However, this didn't necessarily matter because **physicians** had greater access to books due to **printing press** meaning there was a wider variety of medical books than ever before and they were cheaper. This meant medical textbooks containing detailed drawings of human **anatomy** were available for the first time...



Change- Medical healers

3. **Andreas Vesalius' *On the Fabric of the Human Body*** contained detailed anatomical studies of the human body. Importantly, **Vesalius** noted that **Galen** had made errors in his original theory on the human body, in total correcting **300 mistakes!** For example, the human lower jaw was in one part, not two. Another example, the vena cava (the main vein leading out of the heart) did not lead to the liver. Because of this, **Vesalius** encouraged other **physicians** to not rely on perceived knowledge and to carry out dissections for themselves to identify other mistakes and advance medical knowledge still further. One **physician** who did this was **Thomas Sydenham**, who rejected the **Theory of the Four Humours**. Therefore, **Vesalius, Sydenham** and others encouraged a challenging of tradition which would grow in the centuries which followed.

Another change worth noting, **apothecaries** and **barber surgeons** now had to possess licenses to practice their trade.



Change- Hospitals

Unlike in medieval Britain, hospitals were not just places of hospitality where patients could expect food, warmth and prayer – they actually became places of treatment. Patients would now expect a visit from a **physician**, sometimes twice a day, to observe their symptoms and prescribe them treatments. Renaissance hospitals also had their own pharmacies and an **apothecary** to mix the medicines.

In medieval England, 30% of hospitals had been run by the Church, most attached to monasteries and run by monks and nuns. However, **Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries** meant a high percentage of hospitals were closed down. Some smaller hospitals did open, funded by charities, but it took a long time for the amount of hospitals to return to medieval levels.



Change- Hospitals

A similarity between medieval and Renaissance hospitals is that traditional hospitals would still not admit contagious patients. But a key change was the emergence of **pest houses**, also known as **plague houses** or **pox houses**. These catered for infectious patients – people suffering from serious contagious diseases such as plague or pox.



Change- Prevention

Bathing became less fashionable than it had been in medieval Britain. This was because of the arrival of **syphilis** in England. **Syphilis** had spread quickly among people who visited bathhouses. **Henry VIII** consequently closed London bathhouses down in the early 16th century. In reality, **syphilis** spread in bathhouses not because of the baths but because they were also brothels. This is why people in Renaissance times changed their clothes more regularly as it was seen as a safer alternative to visiting a bathhouse.

Another change was the idea that certain weather conditions spread disease. Barometers and thermometers were used to see if there was a link between weather and outbreaks of disease.

There was a greater effort to prevent **miasma** than in Medieval Britain. For example, towns were fined for not cleaning their streets. Another example, projects were established to drain smelly swamps and bogs.



Glossary

- **Anatomy** The science of understanding the structure and make-up of the body.
- **Dissection** The cutting up and examination of the body.
- **Dissolution of the monasteries** Henry VIII split from the Catholic Church in 1533 and created the Church of England. In 1536, he closed down monasteries and confiscated their land.
- **Dysentery** A stomach bug that causes severe diarrhoea.
- **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

- **Jaundice** A condition where your skin and the whites of your eyes turn yellow. It can be a sign of something serious, such as liver disease.
- **Malaria** A fever spread by mosquitoes.
- **Miasma** Smells from decomposing material were believed to cause disease.
- **New World** North and South America. Europeans were only aware of their existence from 1492.
- **Regimen sanitatis** A loose set of instructions provided by physicians to help a patient maintain good health.
- **Syphilis** A sexually transmitted disease that was common from the late fifteenth century.



Comprehension Questions

1. What was a Pest House?
2. Can you explain one continuity and one change in treatment between medieval and Renaissance times?
3. Can you explain one continuity and one change in prevention between medieval and Renaissance times?
4. What difference did Vesalius make for physicians in Renaissance times?
5. Challenge question: How far do you agree that medical treatment and prevention progressed in Renaissance times?

You could use the following sentences to help structure your answer

In some ways treatment and prevention improved in the years 1500-1700. For example...

However, in other ways treatment and prevention didn't improve. For example...

Overall, I mostly agree that...

