

History, Medicine through time

Lesson 2 of 30

Worksheet:

What did people think about where disease came from in medieval Britain?

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The power of the Church

Religion was extremely important to medieval people and most people followed the teachings of the Church. The Church was very powerful in the Middle Ages. It owned vast amounts of land, wealth and was the center of every community. Churches were the most important building in every town and village and the Church also provided healthcare, education and jobs.

Religion was involved in every aspect of life so it is not surprising that people believed that God was involved in the cause of disease. Most ordinary people had no education and so couldn't read or write. Therefore, they relied on the Church to teach them, including their understanding about disease.

Religion was used to explain disease. Many people believed that disease was either a punishment from God for sin, or, it was the devil testing their faith. It was taught that individual illnesses were a result of someone living a sinful life. Whereas, **epidemics** (such as **the Black Death**) were a punishment for the sins of society as a whole.

Malnutrition was also a big problem in the medieval period which could lead to serious illness and **famine** was also explained through religion, again that God was punishing their sins.



Leprosy

Leprosy was a skin disease which could cause people to develop painful ulcers and it could eventually lead to local paralysis (a loss of sensation) which could then lead to other complications such as infection.

Those with leprosy were called lepers and were forced to either live in **leper houses** away from everyone else or wear a bell to make their presence known to people so they could be avoided.

This disease is an example of how medieval people used religion to explain illness. It was believed that lepers were being punished for their sins and this was an example shown in the Bible.



Supernatural beliefs about the cause of disease

Medieval people also believed in the **Doctrine of Signatures**. This was the belief that as God had caused disease, he had also provided all the herbs and plants to treat illness. It was believed that often these herbs and plants would appear a similar shape to the part of the body that was affected.

The Church taught 'good' vs 'evil' and as well as God causing disease, there was also a belief in evil spirits and witchcraft. When sudden, unfortunate events happened it would often be blamed on the supernatural. Medieval people often wore charms to ward off these evil spirits.

Another example of a supernatural belief about the cause of disease was astrology. Although it wasn't as widespread as the belief in God or the Four Humours, it became more popular throughout the medieval period. Some people believed that the alignment of the planets and stars could explain why somebody was ill. Physicians would use star charts to try to diagnose a patient.



Rational explanations

Medieval people didn't only use supernatural ideas to explain disease. There were two main rational explanations; miasma and the Theory of the Four Humours.

Medieval people had made the connection between bad smells and disease. Although they didn't understand the cause of disease they noticed that cities, which were more crowded and dirty, had more cases of disease. So, many medieval people thought it was 'bad air' or miasma that spread disease.

The influence of Hippocrates and Galen was also heavily present in medieval Britain. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Galen's writings had been preserved by Islamic scholars and later brought back to the West. The Theory of the Four Humours was very popular in medieval Britain as it could be used to explain virtually any illness and it was a logical theory that made sense to physicians.



The Theory of the Four Humours

The Theory of the Four Humours stated that the body consisted of four humours. These were blood, phlegm (the substance you often cough up when you have a cold), black bile (a dark substance such as blood clots in excrement) and yellow bile (this could either be pus or vomit). The theory was that the four humours needed to be balanced and when humours became unbalanced, this would cause illness.

There were a number of things that were believed to cause a loss of balance of the humours. For example, the four seasons could lead to a loss of **equilibrium** (balance), as could your age and even the foods you ate. People's star signs were also linked to the humours, such as Pisces being linked with phlegm.

To diagnose illness using the Theory of the Four Humours, physicians would observe a patient's symptoms and consult the chart which showed the links between the humours, the four elements and illnesses. For example, if a patient had a fever then it was thought they had too much blood. This was because blood was linked to the element air which was described as a hot and wet element.



Galen and the Church

You will have already read how powerful the Church was in the everyday lives of medieval people. The Church also controlled education and, before the printing press, books were kept in libraries in monasteries and churches. Therefore, those training to become **physicians** would be taught only about the ideas approved by the Church.

Galen's ideas were approved by the Church because he suggested the human body was so perfectly formed, that there must be a 'creator'. This supported the teachings of the Church and so his writings were promoted. The Church was important in helping old texts to survive and re-translated them from the Arabic translations. Galen's texts were used as university medical texts for those training to be physicians.

There was very little opposition to the teachings of the Church or Galen's ideas in the Middle Ages. Galen's work consisted of many mistakes but, because **dissection** was forbidden by the Church, his ideas remained in use for hundreds of years. An example of limited opposition was **Roger Bacon**. He was arrested for questioning the Church's teachings on Galen. Therefore there were no new ideas about the cause and understanding of disease until the Renaissance which even then was limited.



Glossary

- **Epidemics** - A widespread outbreak of an infectious disease
- **Famine** - A shortage of food
- **Malnutrition** - An illness caused by not having enough to eat
- **Physician** - Like a modern doctor
- **Dissection** - The cutting open and study of dead human bodies/animals



Comprehension Questions

1. What supernatural ideas were there about the cause of disease?
2. Why did the Church support the belief that God caused disease?
3. How did the Theory of the Four Humours explain illness?
4. Why **didn't** medieval people challenge Galen's ideas?
5. Challenge question: How far do you agree that the Church prevented progress in the understanding of the cause of disease in medieval England?

