

History, Medicine through time

Lesson 6 of 30

Worksheet:

How much medical progress was made during medieval Britain?

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Understanding of disease

The understanding of disease remained largely unchanged in the medieval period. As you have already seen there were 3 main beliefs:

- The belief that God caused disease as a punishment for sin.
- The belief that a loss of balance of the four humours would lead to illness.
- The belief that bad smells, *miasma*, caused and spread disease.

These ideas were incorrect and whilst in use prevented the development of effective treatments, which you can see on the next slide.

Some of these beliefs were rational ideas, which could be viewed as progression and moving away from the supernatural. For example, **Hippocrates** and his ideas about the importance of leading a balanced lifestyle. However, the idea that God caused disease and other supernatural beliefs, such as astrology, were still very popular, and were used to explain the **Black Death** in **1348**. It also shows limited progress considering that Roman medicine actively supported the moving away from the supernatural, yet it was so present in medieval Britain.



Treatment of disease

Medieval treatments of disease were closely linked to the main beliefs about the cause of disease:

- Praying to God and to saints was an important part in the treatment of disease. If God had caused disease, it was believed God could cure it if you confessed your sins and **repented**.
- Humoural treatments such as bleeding and purging aimed to restore the balance of the humours. Remember, these treatments were mostly ineffective and physicians could interpret a patient's symptoms differently, meaning different treatments may be given to treat the same illness. Humoural treatments were not consistent. They also could be dangerous for example if too much blood was taken or the poisons contained in emetics.

The herbal remedies had a mixed success in the treatment of disease. Whilst some remedies, such as aloe vera, may have improved digestion, other remedies were based on superstition and could have unpredictable results. For example, the ***Circa Instans*** manual combined herbal remedies with spells and incantations.

The treatments used during the Black Death also show there was little progress in medicine e.g. the strapping of a live chicken to the buboes.



Hospitals and surgery

There was some progress in the care of the sick. Medieval hospitals increased greatly in number which was significant as there was now a specialist environment for those who were sick. The hospitals were surprisingly sanitary and patients would be well cared for by the monks and nuns running the hospitals that were run by the Church.

However, it is important to remember that the sick were not treated for their disease in an effective manner, hospitals were a place where the sick would be cared for instead e.g. changing clothing, keeping patients clean. Patients would not be visited by a physician - although this wouldn't have helped them anyway in most cases.

Whilst barber surgeons were the least qualified in treating illness and only performed basic, external procedures, surgery also saw some progress. The medieval period saw lots of conflict where army surgeons would gain experience in dealing with all sorts of wounds. For example, you have already seen that **John Bradmore** developed forceps for removing arrowheads and kept the wound clean using honey. Another surgeon named **John Arderne** developed pain relief from hemlock, opium and henbane (although this could be dangerous)!



Prevention of disease

Again, like treatments, many preventions were linked back to either God, the Four Humours or *miasma*. This limited progress in medieval medicine.

For example, people would again pray to God to ensure they wouldn't be punished for their sins and during the Black Death **flagellants** whipped themselves whilst praying to God to show they were sorry. People would also carry a posy or a pomander to try to ward off *miasma* and avoid taking baths to stop the disease from entering the pores. These examples of prevention show there was little knowledge about disease.

However, some methods of prevention were effective and it could be argued medieval people had some accurate ideas about how disease spread. For example, the **Regimen Sanitatis** instructed people how to stay healthy and promoted cleanliness. We also know that some local councils made efforts to clean up towns, for example, by removing waste to designated sites. Also during the Black Death, **quarantine** was used to keep those with the disease away from those who were healthy. This would have been effective in preventing the spread of disease.



Factors preventing progress

Factors are the causes of change throughout the medicine through time topic. They include; war, religion, government, communication, science and technology, chance, attitudes and the role of the individual. Some factors are more important than others depending on the time period you are focussing on.

There were a range of factors that did prevent progress in medicine in the medieval period.

- **Religion** - Medieval people had a strong belief in God and did not want to risk going to Hell by criticising the Church. The Church promoted traditional attitudes and as we have already seen had a large impact on medicine in the medieval period. Books were produced in monasteries, and libraries were maintained by the Church, meaning they controlled which books were copied and taught. The influence of religion can clearly be seen through the beliefs about the cause of disease and the way that medieval people try to treat and prevent illness.
- **Individuals** - Students were taught based on the texts of **Galen** and **Hippocrates** rather than practical experience. Their books had been preserved by Arabic scholars and by the medieval period, Latin translations were available in medical schools and universities. There were few other significant individuals that changed the understanding or practice of medicine in medieval Britain.



Factors preventing progress

- **Attitudes in society** - Medieval people had traditional attitudes towards science and medicine. Even those like **Henri de Mondeville**, who criticised classical thinkers, still had to use traditional ideas in diagnosing and treating illness if they hoped to find work. This attitude was encouraged by the church and they were suspicious of anything scientific which could challenge their authority.
- **Science and technology** - There was a lack of scientific evidence to support any other ideas about the causes of disease. Part of this was due to the fact that dissections were illegal so there was little scientific experimentation. Sometimes criminals were sentenced to death by **vivisection**. Barber surgeons would perform the dissections whilst the physicians would read from the works of Galen. Anything that appeared as a mistake on Galen's part was explained by the idea that the body of a criminal would be imperfect because of their sins. So, any new discoveries were made to conform to the old theories, rather than experimenting to explain the discoveries. There was also a lack of technology such as microscopes, which were only developed in the 1600s, this made it difficult to develop new ideas about disease.
- **Communication** - This factor links closely with the lack of technological developments. The **printing press** was developed in around 1440 by **Johannes Gutenberg** in Germany. Although this would have great significance in the Renaissance, it didn't have much impact on medicine in the medieval period. For most of the medieval period, communication of new ideas was relatively slow and inconsistent, meaning new ideas were difficult to spread. There was also a lack of communication between councils, with different towns taking different approaches, especially in the prevention of disease.



Glossary

- ***Circa Instans*** - A medieval herbal manual.
- **Flagellants** - People who prayed and whipped themselves in public in order to receive mercy from God.
- **Printing press** - Made copies of books quicker than copying by hand.
- **Quarantine** - To separate from the rest of the local population because of illness.
- **Repented** - To show you are sorry (to God).
- **Vivisection** - Criminals who were sentenced to death had their bodies cut open and examined.



Comprehension Questions

1. Why was the training of physicians limited in medieval Britain?
2. How did the lack of communication hold back progress in medicine?
3. Did any factors actually help medicine to progress in medieval Britain?
4. Which factor do you think held back progress in medicine the most?
Explain your answer.
5. Challenge question: How far do you agree that there was limited progress in medicine in medieval Britain?

You can use the sentences below to help you:

- In some ways I agree there was limited progress because...
- However it could be argued there was some progress because...
- Overall I strongly _____ that there was limited progress because...

