

Britain, Health and the People: Medieval Knowledge Organiser

Key people

Ancient Greece and Rome

Hippocrates

Created the Theory of the Four Humours and believed in observing the body to get a diagnosis

Galen

Developed the theory of Four Humours. Dissected animals to understand the human body and proved the brain controlled the body. His ideas were favoured by the Medieval Church.

Medieval European

John Arderne

Battlefield surgeon. Believed in the importance of bedside manner and trusting judgement. Relied less on Galen and Hippocrates. Developed cauterising ointment which improved surgical survival rate to 50%

Roger Bacon

Franciscan monk and lecturer at Oxford University. Arrested around 1277 for spreading anti-Church views after questioning the work of Galen.

Medieval Islamic

Al-Razi (Rhazes)

Stressed the need for careful observation of the patient and distinguished between Smallpox and measles. Followed Galen but believed the student should improve the work of the teacher.

Ibn Sina (Avicenna)

Wrote *Canon on Medicine*, covered all ancient Greek and Islamic medicine at the time. Over 1 million words long. Contained chapters on anorexia and obesity. Standard medical text book in the west until the 17th century.

Key words

Amulet

A charm that brought protection from disease

Apothecary

A medieval pharmacist or chemist

Astrology

Study of the planets and their effect on humans

Autopsy/ Dissection

To cut open a human and examine the insides /look for the cause of death

Barber Surgeon

Untrained surgeon, but done apprenticeship, who practised basic surgery

Black Death

A term to describe the bubonic plague

Cauterise

To burn a wound with a heated instrument or caustic substance to stop bleeding or prevent infection

Cupping

Using glass cups to draw blood to the surface

Epidemic

A widespread outbreak of a disease

Fasting

To avoid eating or drinking

Leeching

The use of leeches for bloodletting

Medieval Church

Roman Catholic faith. Daily life and power was dominated by the Church, they controlled education and many people feared God.

Miasma

Bad air which was blamed for spreading disease

Mortality

Death rate—usually measured per 1,000 of the population

Physic garden

Garden used solely for growing herbs to treat illness

Physician

A male medically trained doctor

Pilgrimage

A journey to a religious shrine to cure an illness

Purging

To rid the body of an 'excess' like blood or vomit

Superstition

A belief, not based on knowledge, but on the supernatural. For example witchcraft or astrology

Trepanning

Cutting a hole in the skull to release pressure

Urine Chart

Used to examine urine to define an illness

Vademecum

A medieval medical book carried by doctors

Wise Woman

A female healer, who used folk medicine and herbal remedies

Key events

Influence of Hippocrates and Galen

Nearly a thousand years after the fall of Rome, medicine in Europe had regressed and returned to a more primitive outlook. Treatments continued to be a mixture of herbal remedies, bleeding and purging, and supernatural ideas. Most doctors still believed the Greek theory from Galen, a doctor during the Roman Empire, that you became ill when the 'Four Humours' - phlegm, black bile, yellow bile, blood - became unbalanced. During the medieval era dissection of human bodies was banned so doctors didn't properly understand what went on inside the body

Causes of disease

- Medieval doctors ideas about disease were governed by superstition and religion. For example, the will of God, the stars, demons, sin, bad smells, charms and luck, witchcraft or astrology.
- During epidemics, people would blame witches, nobility or groups who were culturally different such as Jewish people, and attack them

The Black Death

- Doctors were powerless to stop it killing half the population. There were both supernatural and natural explanations for it, for example, some people said that God had sent it as a punishment, others that the planets were in the wrong conjunction, or that it was caused by 'foul air'.
- The impact of this epidemic was long lasting. Crops rotted in fields, village animals escaped, the economy crashed. Laws were passed to try and restore order. The Statute of Labourers (1351) put limits on wages to keep the feudal system in order.
- Land owners switched to sheep farming, further increasing food shortages and reducing the number of jobs available.

Treatments

- Treatments were varied. Some are now seen as successful, those that relied on herbal remedies have now been prove successful. Others were less so, for example;
 - bleeding, applying leeches, smelling strong posies or causing purging or vomiting
 - cutting open buboes, draining the pus and making the patient hot or cold, e.g. by taking hot baths
 - trepanning - cutting a hole in the skull
 - praying, or whipping themselves to try to earn God's forgiveness
 - lighting fires in rooms and spreading the smoke, tidying rubbish from the streets and banning new visitors to towns and villages

Surgery

- There was some progress in the area of surgery. The Middle Ages was a time of constant warfare, so surgeons got lots of practice and:
 - realised that wine was a mild **antiseptic**
 - developed a range of painkillers, including opium
 - Medieval surgeons were very good at practical first aid and even attempted some internal surgery. They could:
 - heal wounds with honey and vinegar and mend broken bones
 - carry out external surgery on problems like ulcers and eye cataracts
 - carry out internal surgery such as bladder stones

Public health

Governments and Kings took no responsibility for public health. It was left largely to the local governments to make laws and intervene. It used to be thought that medieval towns were filthy, without drains, sewers or rubbish collections. Some of this was true as it was a struggle to keep town clean. However, modern historians have found out that:

- Parliament passed the first law requiring people to keep the streets and rivers clean in 1388.
- Medieval people washed and exercised. Many towns had bath houses.
- Towns paid 'gong farmers' to clear out human waste from cesspits.
- Many towns had quarantine laws, boarded up the houses of plague victims, and isolated people with leprosy in 'lazar houses'.
- Monasteries had running water and good toilet facilities.
- Hospitals were built e.g. St Bartholomew's in London in 1123.

Nowadays, historians think that medieval towns were not as dirty as Early Modern towns – but the sights and smells of a medieval town would still probably have made you feel sick.

