

# Introduction to Changes in Health and Medicine in Britain, c.500 to the Present Day

## Eduqas GCSE History Component 2: Thematic Study

**This brief introduction covers the main themes in the development of health and medicine from around 500 to the mid fourteenth century (c.1340).**

This brief introduction attempts to provide an overview of the major trends in health and medicine in the period before 1500 in an integrated way. It is advised that this introduction should last around 2-3 hours of teaching and learning.

Once this overview has been completed, it is advised that centres following the WJEC Eduqas specification utilise either of the following resources on health and medicine:

- Changes in Health and Medicine in Britain, c.500 to the present day by Hodder Education
- Changes in Health and Medicine c. 1345 to the present day by CPF Hughes published by CAA

While this period was important in the history of health and medicine, the pace of change was slow and there was much continuity in attitudes and approaches regarding the prevention and treatment of illness and disease

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## MEDIEVAL HEALTH: CAUSES OF ILLNESS AND DISEASE

The average life expectancy of a person in the UK in the twenty-first century is around 80 years old.

The average life expectancy of a person in the British Isles in the mid-fourteenth century was around 35 years old. Why was there such a difference in the life expectancy of people?

Most of this revolves around two issues:

- The wide range of causes of illness and disease
- a lack of accurate medical knowledge

The period studied was one characterised throughout Europe by constant poverty, frequent famine, regular warfare and a lack of basic hygiene. When combined, these factors meant that people were very likely to die from a variety of conditions and diseases. Lack of medical knowledge meant that attempts to prevent or treat medical conditions and diseases were not very successful.

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## SOME GENERAL CAUSES OF ILLNESS AND DISEASE

### Poverty

In the medieval period, poverty was common and was a general cause of ill-health. Basically most people lived in a subsistence economy where each village made most of the things it needed and most of the population were subsistence farmers. They grew as much food as their families needed, if they were lucky.

Daily life for peasants was a constant struggle for the basics of food, water and health. Peasants had few resources for maintaining the minimum of what we currently consider to be hygiene, which meant that disease and death were common.

### Famine

During the medieval period famine, both local and national, was a constant threat. Most people had to endure several famines during their short lives. Famine was a major cause of disease causing serious malnutrition. Famine could be caused by climate changes, disease of crops or by warfare.

A major example of a famine causing many deaths was the Great Famine in Europe between 1315 and 1317. It is estimated that several million people died due to starvation in a famine that extended from Scotland to Spain and Russia to Ireland.

The impact of famine is reflected in popular culture with tales like that of Hansel and Gretel being based on abandoned starving children during a famine.

### Warfare

Many medical conditions and deaths were caused by regular outbreaks of warfare. This was the period of the Crusades and later struggles for power during the Hundred Years War and the Wars of the Roses. Siege warfare was used regularly to starve out towns and castles.

Soldiers and civilians suffered from various health problems such as broken bones, flesh wounds and abscesses. Dreadful amputations were carried out on injured soldiers in unsanitary conditions.

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## LACK OF HYGIENE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

There is no doubt that by modern standards medieval communities were filthy. Streets had open sewers filled with rubbish and excrement. This waste was occasionally removed and dumped in nearby rivers and streams. In such environments, germs and diseases were easily spread.

However, recent historical research has suggested that there was some progress towards improved conditions in some medieval towns and cities. The following has been pointed out as evidence for this interpretation:

- There is evidence that people in medieval towns washed and exercised. Many large towns had public bath houses. In Southwark in London, there were 18 hot bathhouses often linked to local bakeries
- Streets were cleaned of refuse by gangs of labourers
- Many towns had quarantine laws which held up ships in port for up to forty days
- Monasteries had running water and clean toilet facilities
- Hospitals were built in large cities. St Bartholomew's in London was founded in 1123

## POOR LIVING CONDITIONS

There is no doubt that living conditions in the home were very unhygienic. One common practice was to use rushes as floor covering which, as one writer observed, 'harboured phlegm, vomit, urine of dogs and people, excrement and food scraps.'

Historians also think that poor living habits and diet were just as responsible for disease. This is shown by the fact that both the rich and the poor suffered from similar conditions and illnesses. Poor diet led to anaemia and also helped cause rheumatism, arthritis and dysentery. Many women died in childbirth and sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis were very common.

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## KEY POINTS THAT STUDENTS SHOULD BE AWARE OF

- Life expectancy in medieval times was very low
- Illnesses and disease were very common in medieval times
- Generally people's health was threatened by the effects of poverty, famine and warfare
- There were some examples of progress in sanitation seen, especially in monasteries and hospitals, but generally there was a lack of public health in all large towns and cities
- The living conditions and habits of all classes were very unhygienic
- These trends in the causes of illness and disease continued into the early modern age after 1400

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## MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE AND METHODS OF TREATING ILLNESS AND DISEASE

There was a mixture of medical knowledge and superstition used by doctors in this period. However, during the period, there was very little change in how doctors and physicians approached the treatment of disease and illness.

Effective medical knowledge was limited in medieval times. Much knowledge had been lost or destroyed during the Dark Ages when barbarian tribes invaded and roamed over Europe. Much of the medical knowledge of the ancient Greeks and Romans was largely lost to Europeans.

There was some understanding of the work of Hippocrates (from 400 BC) who had written on the value of clinical observation and recording of symptoms. He also developed the theory of the Four Humours to explore the causes of disease and help with treatment. This idea was commonly held in medieval times.

Another ancient medical scholar was Galen (AD129-203). He was influential in anatomy and gave many practical demonstrations and wrote several texts on the subject. Several universities developed medical schools after 1100 and their lectures on anatomy were based on the written work of Galen, mainly because the Church forbade the dissection of human bodies for research.

Most doctors in the medieval period still believed in the theory that you became ill when the Four Humours of the body became imbalanced. These four humours were vital liquids found in the body – phlegm, black bile, yellow bile and blood.

Doctors were also influenced by superstition including astronomy and the use of Zodiac charts. There was also widespread belief that disease was associated with demons or witches or that it was sent as a punishment by God. Other doctors blamed bad smells (miasma) but didn't associate this with filthy conditions.

During epidemics of disease, many people would also blame and attack culturally different groups such as Jews.

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Many villages used local remedies based on available herbs and plants which were often effective in relieving pain and curing minor ailments, but other types of cures seem very strange today. These included:

- Removing excess blood from the body, either by cutting or by using leeches
- Removing excess bile by encouraging vomiting
- Giving hot and cold treatments to balance the humours
- Trepanning – cutting a hole in the skull
- Self-flagellation (whipping)

There was some progress in the use of surgery in medieval times. Due to the amount of battle, surgeons had lots of opportunities to practise. There were also some basic discoveries such as the use of wine as an antiseptic and the use of opium and alcohol to numb pain.

Surgeons used basic techniques but the work of Galen did have some positive influence on setting bones and healing wounds. There were also records of successful operations on conditions such as ulcers, cataracts and bladder stones.

## KEY POINTS THAT STUDENTS SHOULD BE AWARE OF:

Doctors had a mixture of medical knowledge and superstition in medieval times

Some of the ideas of the ancient world had survived into medieval times

Much more medical knowledge was based on superstition

Herbal remedies could be effective in local communities

Many attempts at curing conditions were strange by modern standards

There were some advances in surgery due to the need to treat those injured in war