*This podcast helps you to understand the Theory of the Four Humours and the miasma theory, and the continuing influence in England of Hippocrates and Galen.*

Much of the medicine in the Middle Ages was based closely on Roman and Greek ideas about health, and there was little very forward progress made in the development of medical theories. Medieval doctors were just as clever and hardworking as the doctors that had come before them and those that followed afterwards, but simply chose to respect traditional principles about disease and to continue using long-established cures. Many of these theories about the causes of disease are rational and use ideas based on the natural world, such as the Theory of the Four Humours and the miasma theory.

The Theory of the Four Humours is a significant example of a rational explanation for the causes of disease. This theory suggested that poor health was caused as a result of an imbalance of the four ‘Humours’ in the body. These ‘Humours’ were bodily liquids which were all essential for good health, known as ‘blood’ ‘phlegm’, ‘black bile’ and ‘yellow bile’. If these humours remained balanced and equal, the body would be fit and strong. As soon as there became too much or too little of a particular humour, the body would become unwell. This was a very logical explanation for disease. If you think about when a patient has a cold or the ‘flu, they will certainly produce plenty of phlegm. Modern medicine knows that this is a symptom not a cause of the illness. But, in the medieval period, this was evidence that there was too much phlegm in the body, and that it was this excess ‘Humour’ which was making the patient unwell. This theory was used to explain more than simple coughs and colds, but also to account for serious and wide-scale medical problems. In 1365, the famous physician John Burgundy blamed the terrible devastation of the Black Death on the ‘evil humours’ suffered by those that died. This theory did not start in the Middle Ages, but was actually created first by a Greek doctor called Hippocrates and developed by a Roman doctor named Galen.

The persistence of these theories is further evidence that medicine in the Middle Ages was often rational and linked to the natural world. It is also evidence that medieval medicine made little progress, as doctors stuck to these ideas very strictly, believing that Hippocrates and Galen’s theories were correct in every way.

As well as the Theory of the Four Humours, the ‘miasma’ theory is an example of a rational explanation for disease. This theory held that illnesses were caused by foul smelling air. Medieval people tried many ways to combat this problem, such as lighting fires to purify the air, and medieval governments introduced laws designed to keep streets and water supplies clean.

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*This is a podcast to help you understand the supernatural and religious explanations for the cause of disease.*

In the Middle Ages there were many theories about what caused disease. Some of these ideas were the result of people’s strong religious beliefs, while some explanations were rooted in the natural world. It’s important to remember that for medieval people, these two concepts were very closely linked and often medical problems were explained by both supernatural and natural theories. Understanding the ideas that people had about the causes of disease is essential to your study of the history of medicine. So, how did people in the Middle Ages use religion to explain why people became unwell?

In medieval Europe, the Christian Church played an important role in society. Religion was a central part of people’s day-to-day lives and God was believed to control every decision, action or event on earth. Consequently, religious explanations for illness were common. A good example of this is in the case study on the Black Death, a disease that many people at the time believed was caused by God’s decision to punish those on earth for their sins. This meant that many of the treatments designed to prevent or cure the Black Death, such as going on pilgrimages or fasting, had a religious reason behind them: to ask God’s forgiveness for their sins. This meant that many of the treatments designed to prevent or cure the Black Death, such as going on pilgrimages or fasting, had a religious reason behind them – to ask God’s forgiveness for their sins. This was a logical explanation, because people believed God controlled all aspects of the world, including illness and death.

God’s punishment wasn’t the only idea about why diseases happened. People in the Middle Ages also believed that the stars and the planets influenced whether they became unwell or not. They believed that the movement and position of the planets impacted their health and, as a result, the study of astrology was an important part of a physician’s medical training. Although the planets are part of the natural world, this idea about the causes of disease is linked to religion too. It was believed that God also controlled the position of the planets, and therefore people’s health.

People also believe that miasma, or bad smelling air, caused illnesses by poisoning people as they inhaled the air. This is evidenced in the things that were done to prevent the spread of the disease, such as the raking of the streets and the building of latrines. Although this concept of miasma is based on the natural world, it is also linked to people’s religious belief. They believed that God permitted the miasma to poison them. Even this explanation, which appears to be fixed in the natural world, is in fact closely linked with the strong and ever-present belief in God and the teachings of the medieval Church.

These religious and supernatural ideas about the causes of diseases were logical explanations based on the evidence and beliefs that people had at the time. By understanding what people thought caused illnesses, historians can begin to consider why there was so little change in medicine in the Middle Ages.

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*This podcast helps you to understand approaches to prevention and treatment and their connection with ideas about disease and illness, including religious actions, blood-letting and purging, purifying the air and the use of remedies.*

**Questioner:** This quiz is going to test your knowledge of medieval treatments for illnesses, and how people tried to prevent disease. However, it’s not enough to know what people did – you also need to know WHY they did it. Are you ready?

**Interviewee:** Yes, I’m ready!

**Questioner:** Name three things that people did to purify the air.

**Interviewee:** Oh, that’s easy. They carried sweet smelling herbs, they kept the air moving by ringing bells, and townspeople did a lot to keep some towns clean. They employed rakers to sweep the streets, built latrines, and passed laws to stop people throwing litter.

**Questioner:** So, why did people want to purify the air?

**Interviewee:** Well, it’s all because people believed in miasma theory – that bad smelling air caused illnesses. By cleaning the air, they were helping to prevent disease.

**Questioner:** Name two treatments for illnesses that were related to the Theory of the Four Humours.

**Interviewee:** Physicians would sometimes bleed their patients. They would also encourage them to purge themselves, which means they made themselves sick.

**Questioner:** Why did they do these things?

**Interviewee:** The Theory of the Four Humours stated that people became ill when they had an excess of one of the ‘humours’ – blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile. So, it made sense for physicians to try to offload some of the excess ‘humour’.

**Questioner:** Excellent. Now, name one more natural treatment.

**Interviewee:** Women would make herbal remedies for cuts, wounds and bites. These remedies would be made out of parts of animals, minerals and of course herbs. They were written down in books called ‘herbals’ and passed along by word of mouth. And actually, they sometimes worked! So these successful herbal treatments were repeated time and time again. However, these remedies also contained aspects of the supernatural, because they often were combined with prayers.

**Questioner:** I’m glad you brought this up. We’ve talked a lot about natural cures for disease. What about supernatural treatments then?

**Interviewee:** There are lots of examples of this. People would go to church to pray for the health of their family and friends. They would also go on pilgrimages to saints’ tombs, to ask for God’s forgiveness. A very small amount of people, known as flagellants, would violently punish themselves in public.

**Questioner:** Of course you know what I’m going to ask. Why did people believe this would help themselves or their family member recover from an illness?

**Interviewee:** In medieval Europe, belief in God was central to society’s understanding of the way the world worked. People believed God caused disease and illnesses as a way of punishing the world because it had sinned. Therefore, by asking God for forgiveness and punishing yourself for your sins, you were helping to cure disease.

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*This podcast helps you to understand new and traditional approaches to hospital care in the thirteenth century, including the role of the physician, apothecary and barber surgeon in treatment and care provided within the community and in hospitals, c.1250–1500.*

**Questioner:** So, who could care for the sick in the medieval period?

**Interviewee:** Many different people. There were trained physicians, barber surgeons, and apothecaries. Women also had a huge role to play in the treatment of illnesses.

**Questioner:** Tell me a little more about these physicians.

**Interviewee:** Physicians trained for a long time in universities, studying extensively the theories of respected Greek, Roman and Arab doctors. The fees these physicians charged to help people, however, were incredibly expensive and therefore only wealthy patients could afford to pay for their services.

**Questioner:** So, who else helped people when they became unwell?

**Interviewee:** Barber surgeons would, for a fee, help people who needed basic surgery, such as removing a tumour or sewing up wounds. Barber surgeons didn’t go to university, so they trained on the job as apprentices. Apothecaries also made their own herbal medicines to sell to the sick.

**Questioner:** You mentioned that women also helped with caring for the sick… Can you explain more about this?

**Interviewee:** Medieval society did not believe that women were as intelligent or capable as men in the field of medicine, so did not permit the education of women as physicians. Despite this, women played a major role in healing people when they became sick. Most women knew at least some cures and remedies – as it was a woman’s role to care for their family members when they were ill. Some women trained as barber surgeons, and some became licensed midwives. These women would also charge a fee to the patient’s family for their medical services.

**Questioner:** You’ve talked a lot about who could treat the sick, but where did patients get treated?

**Interviewee:** Mostly, patients were cared for at home. However, from the eleventh century, religious orders of monks and nuns started to establish hospitals. These hospitals were tiny in comparison to those in the modern day, with usually fewer than ten beds. They would typically only care for the elderly, rather than the sick, who the monks and nuns feared would spread disease. From the thirteenth century, guild hospitals were also established to care for the guild members and other locals who had grown too old or sick to be able to care for themselves.

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*This podcast helps you to learn the key events of the Black Death, 1348–49 and its causes, treatments and methods of prevention.*

**Questioner:** So, here they are: headlines from the Black Death, 1348–49. Complete the following headlines…

… The Black Death originated in China and arrived in England in …?

**Interviewee:** 1348

**Questioner:** It first arrived in the port of …?

**Interviewee:** Melcombe, in Dorset.

**Questioner:** The percentage of population killed by the Black Death is estimate to be …?

**Interviewee:** At least 40%

**Questioner:** The symptoms of the Black Death were …?

**Interviewee:** Fever, the development of pus-filled buboes, and a severe headache followed by unconsciousness and death.

**Questioner:** The Black Death was probably caused by …?

**Interviewee:** The bubonic plague, which was spread by fleas and rats.

**Questioner:** In the medieval period people had many different beliefs about the causes of the Black Death. These were …?

**Interviewee:** That God was punishing them, that dirt created bad smells, poisoning the air which then poisoned people, that the movements of the planets caused the disease and that their ‘humours’ were out of balance.

**Questioner:** People tried to prevent the Black Death from spreading by…?

**Interviewee:** Holding services in Church, going on pilgrimage, cleaning their towns by employing rakers to clear the streets and fining those that threw litter.

**Questioner:** Once their family or friends had the Black Death, people tried to treat the disease by …?

**Interviewee:** Bleeding the sufferer to remove excess blood. Encouraging the person to purge themselves, which means making themselves sick. Cutting open the bubo to let the pus seep out. They also prayed to God, and put holy charms around the neck of the person suffering from the illness.

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