

Ideas about illness and possible causes and cures

Prehistoric Times

We do not know what prehistoric people thought about causes of and cures for illness so we look at the Australian Aborigines who lived as hunter-gatherers until quite recently. Prehistoric people may have had different ideas. We just cannot be certain. Aborigines thought that illness was caused either by an evil spirit entering the body or by the person's own spirit being taken out of the body. An enemy could do either of these by pointing a bone at another person and saying a special chant or spell. Charms could be worn to keep evil spirits away. A Medicine Man could be brought in to deal with evil spirits possessing the ill person. Herbs and plants which could deal with everyday problems such as stomach upsets, burns and sprains were discovered and knowledge was passed down to others by word of mouth.

Ancient Egypt

Like most early people they thought that disease was caused by gods and spirits. Special prayers or spells could be said to make a person better. Charms could be worn to keep evil spirits away. A priest could be brought in to deal with evil spirits possessing the ill person. Later healing was done by people who were not priests. A class of doctors emerged. A belief spread that some diseases had natural causes and came about when the internal channels of the body became blocked. Medicines were given to unblock these channels e.g. substances to make the patient sick or go to the toilet. Herbs and plants which could deal with everyday problems such as stomach upsets, burns and sprains were discovered and knowledge was passed down to others after a system of writing had developed.

Ancient Greece

The Greeks at first thought that things which they did not understand e.g. earthquakes and diseases were caused by gods. Temples called Asclepia were dedicated to a legendary god or healer called Asclepios and were built all over Greece. Patients would sleep in these and during the night they believed that Asclepios and his two daughters, Panacea and Hygea, would treat the sick. Snakes would lick the affected parts. In the morning the patient would wake up cured. These temples were so calm and peaceful that they became the Greek equivalent of our health farms and convalescent homes. Patients whose illnesses were caused by stress and worry could recover.

As in Egypt a belief later spread that illnesses had natural causes and cures. Hippocrates and his followers put forward the Four Humour Theory. They noticed that whenever some one was ill one or more of four liquids (or humours) was present. (BLOOD, PHLEGM, YELLOW BILE AND BLACK BILE) They were confusing EFFECTS of the illness with the CAUSES of it. Treatments were developed to remove the extra amount of humour or to encourage more of it to be produced. Hippocrates also developed the writing down of symptoms. This was called clinical observation and doctors could tell the patients how the disease would develop and give medicines to treat each stage. They also thought that exercise and diet could help to maintain a balance of humours and body temperature e.g. eating a lot and drinking little in winter and eating less and drinking a lot in summer.

Ancient Rome

The Romans also thought that gods could cause and cure illness. They accepted Greek ideas and believed in building temples to Asclepios. They also accepted the Four-Humour Theory.

Galen reinforced the belief in this and prescribed the use of opposites e.g. Hot showers for people suffering with colds and lettuce and cucumbers for those with fevers.

They were a very practical people and also saw the value of exercise in preserving health. They built a temple to Febris, goddess of fever but showed the practical side of their nature by draining the marshes which spread malaria. Their main contribution to the history of Public Health is their recognition that diseases were spread by poor drinking water and poor disposal of sewage. They built aqueducts to bring fresh water into their settlements from springs and latrines and sewers to take sewage into the rivers. They did not just build these in Rome. Everywhere they settled they were ready to build aqueducts, latrines and sewers. There are remains of aqueducts (the bridge-like structures which carried water across valleys) in Italy, Spain and France. They also used herbs as medicines and we can read about these in books that Doctors wrote.

The Middle Ages

There was a return to a belief in supernatural causes and cures for illness. Illness was thought to be a punishment from God for sins. Touching holy objects, saying special prayers or visiting the tomb of a saint could help to bring cures. (Remember the film "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade") After the fall of the Roman Empire there was about 700 years of confusion and attacks. The Roman Catholic Church helped to keep alive the ideas of the Romans and Greeks. The four-humour theory seemed sensible and doctors believed in this. Galen had set out the ideas of the Greeks so well that he was thought to be right about everything. Anyone who suggested new ideas would be attacked by the Church and possibly burned as a heretic. The Great Plague which first reached Europe in 1347 inspired a number of theories about its cause e.g. a punishment from God, bad smells, the close position of the three great planets, Saturn, Jupiter and Mars. Herbs and flowers were carried to try to remove the bad smells.

Renaissance times

Many of the old ideas continued e.g. disease being a punishment from God, bad smells spreading disease, the value of herbs, the position of the moon, stars and planets affecting health and the four humour theory. Printing helped to spread new ideas very quickly. Vesalius pointed out the mistakes that Galen had made. Pare suggested using cool lotions on wounds instead of boiling oil and he sewed up cut blood vessels after amputations but infection still killed many of his patients. The one important breakthrough was Harvey's discovery of how the blood circulated. Knowledge of this rarely improved treatments and an incorrect belief in the value of bleeding patients still continued.