

Public Health

Prehistoric Times

Because hunter-gatherers moved around from place to place there was little danger to their health from poor sanitation. Some Aborigine tribes buried their excrement and cast off hair and nails. This was probably done to prevent an enemy using evil magic against them but it would help to stop the spread of disease.

Egyptian times

The Egyptians developed a system of writing which meant that knowledge could be used by later generations. They did pray to the goddess who was thought to cause and cure epidemics and wore scarab brooches to frighten away the evil spirits who caused disease. They must have seen the connection between dirt and disease because both rich and poor washed frequently. Egyptian ladies used coloured eye make-up possibly because they knew that they helped to prevent many of the infectious eye diseases. Simple toilets and latrines have been found but it seems that the sewage was stored, later dug out and removed. It does not seem that water was used to flush it away

Greek ideas

We know that the Greeks picked up many Egyptian ideas. They came to believe that disease had natural causes and could be prevented. They also believed in keeping themselves clean. They tried to eat the correct food for the time of year and to exercise. They did not use water for flushing away sewage. The Romans in turn were influenced by the Greeks.

Other civilisations

We know that cities in India had sewers around 1500 B.C. Crete had an elaborate system of sewers and water supply but volcanic eruptions buried them. The Romans had to find their own answers to problems which Cretan engineers had already solved.

Importance of the Romans

The Romans are important because they went much further than any other people in the Ancient World. The Romans wanted clean water and good drainage for people throughout their empire. In other words the Romans were the first people to plan and carry out a programme of public health on a large scale. An example of the practical nature is how they tried to stop fevers. At first they tried praying to the goddess Febris but later took the sensible step of draining the marshes. They did not know that mosquitoes spread the fever but they found a way of breaking the chain of infection.

The Greek idea which most influenced the Romans was the importance of staying healthy. To the Romans it seemed much more practical to spend time keeping fit than to spend money on doctors for the sick. "We must pray for a healthy mind in a healthy body," wrote Juvenal, a Roman poet.

The Romans believed it was important to build their settlements - their cities, villas, villages and army forts - in healthy places near good springs, rivers or wells. They built conduits (channels) to bring water into their settlements. When the water had to go over hills and valleys the Romans built the conduits (channels) on top of arches. These looked like bridges and were called aqueducts. They were so well built that a number are still standing today 1700 or more years later.

Besides clean drinking water, the Romans the Romans also believed in the importance of personal cleanliness. They set about making daily bathing a possibility for all citizens. Wherever the Romans settled, they built public baths.

The Roman interest in public health also led to them building latrines. They used water to flush away the waste products. Rome had huge sewers which emptied into the River Tiber. Romans took their drinking water from other rivers and springs. The building of sewers stopped germs infecting drinking water.

The Romans were able to provide these facilities because they were well organised, could enforce peace, could raise money through taxation and could use slaves as a cheap labour force

AD450 - round 1800 a period of little or no progress

The Roman Empire collapsed around 450 A.D. and there followed a long period of great disorder. It was healthier to live in Arab-occupied Europe than in the Christian-ruled areas because the Arabs believed in cleanliness.

No Christian ruler was powerful or rich enough to carry on what the Romans had done. Public health conditions grew worse. Rivers were used as dumping grounds for sewage and other waste and also as sources of drinking water. As towns grew in size, the problem became worse. Town governments passed laws against dumping sewage and other waste but could not suggest ways of dealing with the problems. The Black Death reached Europe in 1340 and spread very quickly. The filthy streets and piles of rubbish encouraged rats and they carried the fleas which spread the disease. Making travellers spend 40 days (quarantine) outside cities to help to keep infected people away was a sensible method of preventing the plague as was advice to keep away from infected people. The carrying of sweet-smelling flowers and burning strong-smelling materials did not help stop the plague spreading. There were other epidemics of the plague. The 1665 epidemic was the last major one in Britain. Problems of providing water and taking away sewage lasted until the middle of the 1800s. The development of steam-powered pumping engines made improvements possible.

VERY POOR CONDITIONS IN THE TOWNS AFTER THE GROWTH OF FACTORIES

As more and more people moved into the towns to work, houses were built as close together as possible. Many of them were damp and overcrowded. Many towns had no sewers and everywhere there were stinking toilets and piles of filth which seeped into rivers from which drinking water was taken. All this encouraged disease, especially among the poor. Tuberculosis, Typhoid (spread by water and food) and Smallpox attacked people already weakened by overcrowding, poor diet and exhaustion. The average life expectancy for a poor person born in Manchester in 1830 was only 19.