

RELIGION, MORALITY AND MEDICINE

THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN MEDICINE

Because humans could think and reason, they would try to find explanations for illness and disease. Good spirits and evil spirits could explain cures and diseases. Often there were cures. If someone believes that some action will bring a cure, it sometimes does. Even today doctors realise that giving a patient a harmless but useless substance will sometimes speed up a cure. There are still some apparently miraculous cures.

RELIGION AND MEDICINE IN ANCIENT TIMES

There was still a strong belief that diseases were mainly caused by spirits and gods. People carried charms to protect themselves and muttered spells. The cutting up of dead bodies to increase medical knowledge was not approved of as it might affect an afterlife. The coming of new ideas did not mean that old ideas were scrapped. Long after the time of Hippocrates many Greeks went on believing that illnesses could be cured by gods. Temples dedicated to Asclepius continued to be built and used throughout Greek and Roman times. Priests and doctors used a mixture of magical and practical methods of cure, just as people had done since prehistoric times. The calm and peaceful surroundings of an Asclepeian temple could help all patients and especially those whose illnesses were caused by worry.

CHRISTIANITY AND MEDICINE

The Church was important because it tried to preserve the writings and the ideas of the Greeks and Romans. It did set up hospitals to look after those who were pushed out by others e.g. lepers, lunatics, the incurably ill and the elderly.

The Church discouraged new ideas and people who put forward new ideas were sometimes burned to death as heretics. It discouraged dissection and would only allow the bodies of convicted criminals to be cut up. The thought of an after-life in Heaven made people put up with disease and suffering.

There was a return to a belief in "magic" charms and the chanting of words. Holy objects which were supposed to have belonged to or to have been touched by Christ or the Saints were thought to have special curing powers. People made journeys to the tombs of certain saints. People still go to Lourdes in France. Catholics still say prayers to the Virgin Mary or certain saints.

DID THE CHURCH STOP PROGRESS?

It does seem that religion did stop progress at times but it would be foolish to be too critical. Its discouragement of the dissection of corpses did slow down understanding of the structure of the body but this knowledge would not have been much use. Corpses being dissected do not struggle, scream or spurt blood; live patients do all three. The Church cannot really be blamed for stopping people understanding the causes of disease. Rapid progress could only come in the 1800s when microscopes were powerful enough to identify different kinds of microbes. Governments only felt a need to do something about public health from the 1830s onwards after there had been serious epidemics of cholera and typhoid. Only in the last 150 years have doctors been solving the problems caused by pain, infection, bleeding and replacing lost blood.

RELIGION AND MEDICINE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

At first there was still a strong feeling against dissection. Burke and Hare killed people so they could sell their bodies to medical schools. Many clergymen did not like the idea of vaccination as it was polluting God's creation by putting pus taken from an animal (a cow) into a scratch on a human's arm. Many clergymen were against women having anaesthetics during childbirth as in the Bible it says, "In sorrow shall thou bring forth children". It was not until Queen Victoria was given chloroform during the birth of her eighth child that its use was generally accepted.

RELIGION, MORALITY AND MEDICINE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Strict Catholics do not approve of abortion, sterilisation or contraception. This is causing problems for the Catholic Church in the Third World where populations are rising quickly. Many doctors and nurses do not like carrying out abortions for social rather than health reasons. Jehovah's Witnesses think that blood transfusions and organ transplants are sinful. There is a growing movement for euthanasia (mercy killing for those who are suffering) and doctors have been prosecuted for helping people in great pain to die. There are great debates about doctors paying people for donating their organs. Doctors have to choose when to switch off life-support systems when there is no hope of recovery. In recent years doctors had to go to court to get permission to stop feeding one of the Hillsborough coma victims. Most people will accept test-tube fertilisation and egg-implants for women who are childless but genetic engineering techniques make it possible to alter the characteristics of life forms and this may be done to humans.