

## **What role have governments taken in improving the health of the people?**

**Alice:** Hello! You're listening to the Bitesize GCSE History podcast.

**Anouska:** We'll be helping you with your GCSE exam on the History of Medicine. My name's Anouska Lewis, and I'm a history podcaster.

**Alice:** And I'm Alice Loxton, historian and author. We know there's lots to learn for your exams so we're here to highlight some of the key facts, people and events.

**Anouska:** In this episode, we're looking at the government's role in improving people's health.

**Alice:** We'll look at how it's changed or stayed the same over time. Remember the concept of change and continuity is really important for this topic.

**Anouska:** You'll be hearing actors reading real historical accounts and there will be a quiz at the end so stay tuned.

**Alice:** So, from our previous episodes, we know that governments didn't really get involved in people's everyday lives before the 19th century.

**Anouska:** The government mostly took a laissez-faire approach to medicine - laissez-faire being a French term that means 'let it be'. The government didn't think it was their job to interfere in people's lives.

**Alice:** However, as we moved through the 19th century, things were changing, and the British government took on more responsibility for people's health. But why did this come about and what did the change look like?

**Anouska:** Well, firstly let's hear a report published in 1844. It's part of a government investigation into the living conditions of people in Birmingham.

**Actor:** Many of these places stand greatly in need of regulations for cleansing. The atmosphere, which is necessarily close and confined, is often further deteriorated by the presence of open privies, close to which there is often one or more pigsties, tubs full of hogs' wash, and heaps of offensive manure.

**Alice:** Sounds smelly. Well after significant pressure, the government passed its first Public Health Act in 1844, and a second one was passed almost 30 years later in 1875.

**Anouska:** The 1844 measures were optional, but the 1875 Act meant local authorities had to follow a set of rules to improve public health. Grab a notebook and make some notes here. Councils were now required to:

**Alice:** provide clean water,

**Anouska:** improve sewage systems,

**Alice:** regulate housing,

**Anouska:** regulate food safety,

**Alice:** collect waste and clean the streets.

**Anouska:** But why was the government making these changes now?

**Alice:** Firstly, the germ theory had proven the link between dirt and disease, so they knew cleaner towns and cities would help prevent illness.

**Anouska:** And in 1867, working-class men were given the right to vote. If political parties could deal with problems that affected this particular group, then they'd be much more likely to win their vote.

**Alice:** So, after the 1875 Act, public health became a serious topic in Britain. The government had put measures in place to improve the health of the nation.

**Anouska:** But it soon became clear that more needed to be done. In 1889, a social researcher named Charles Booth carried out an investigation. He created a social map of London and claimed that about 30% of the city's population lived in poverty.

**Alice:** Then in 1900, another social reformer called Seebohm Rowntree conducted a similar study in the city of York. He found that almost 30% were living in poverty there too.

**Anouska:** Another driver for change was the Second Boer War which began in 1899. It was a conflict between the British Empire and the Boer republics in Southern Africa. But recruitment was poor. A large number of men who volunteered were too unfit to fight for medical reasons.

**Alice:** It was clear that more needed to be done to reduce poverty and improve public health. When the Liberal Party won the 1906 election, they began introducing their Liberal reforms. From 1906-1914 these reforms included:

**Anouska:** free school meals and medical treatment for children,

**Alice:** pensions for older people on low incomes,

**Anouska:** health insurance for low-paid workers,

**Alice:** and unemployment insurance for those out of work. These are just some examples. For more, head to the GCSE History section of the Bitesize website.

**Alice:** Anouska, in our episode on patient care developments, we talked about the first vaccine didn't we?

**Anouska:** Yes, we did. It was discovered by Edward Jenner.

**Alice:** Well almost 150 years later, in the early 1940s, the first national vaccination campaign began. The vaccine was for diphtheria, which killed around 3000 children every year.

**Anouska:** Implementing the vaccine wasn't quick, but as the Second World War progressed, keeping the population healthy and free from disease was a top priority.

**Alice:** Once the government did roll out the vaccine, infection rates from diphtheria dropped massively, and today it's rare.

**Anouska:** The government has launched various vaccination programmes since then. In the 1950s there was one for polio. In the 1960s one for tetanus and one for measles. And in 1970 there was one for rubella. A recent example of a mass vaccination programme was to protect the population from Covid-19. This began in the year 2020.

**Actor:** Case study - The NHS.

**Anouska:** You've probably heard of the NHS - it's Britain's National Health Service. But it hasn't always existed, so how did it come about?

**Alice:** Commissioned by the war-time government, a civil servant named William Beveridge published a report in 1942. In it, he highlighted the big issues he felt threatened society. These included disease and squalor.

**Anouska:** To tackle disease, Beveridge proposed a new health system. It would be free at the point of service, open to everyone, and funded through people paying taxes. This was the beginning of the Welfare State.

**Alice:** The NHS was introduced in 1948 and marked a huge change in how involved the government was in medicine and healthcare.

**Anouska:** There was now free medical treatment for everyone, and services were under one organisation, including hospitals, pharmacists, opticians and dentists.

**Alice:** But not everyone agreed with it, did they?

**Anouska:** No. For example, doctors who had previously worked privately, thought that the NHS would take away some of their independence and their income.

**Alice:** To overcome this, Aneurin Bevan, who was the Minister of Health at the time, agreed that doctors could continue to treat private patients as well as NHS patients.

**Anouska:** The NHS case study demonstrates a change. The government was becoming more involved in public health.

**Alice:** Yes. Remember we started this episode talking about laissez-faire. During the 18th and 19th centuries the government wouldn't really get involved in public health and had a hands-off approach. So that's a big change.

**Anouska:** Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, this government involvement continued. As well as providing free healthcare, today the government has a role in funding medical research, passing laws to help prevent disease, and educating people about their health.

**Alice:** NHS campaigns have encouraged people to lead healthier lives. For example, you may have seen adverts and posters about the importance of exercising and eating healthily. Let's look at an example.

**Anouska:** In 1952, the city of London was covered in a lethal smog for five days which killed thousands of people. But this wasn't the first time.

**Alice:** No, this followed a long history of London fog where the city would be covered in a thick smoke-like pollution. It was caused by people burning coal to heat their homes.

**Anouska:** Here's a statement from the Ministry of Health, dated 19th December 1952.

**Actor:** During the five days 5th to 9th December the greater part of Metropolitan London

was continually enveloped by smoke-laden fog. There was for this period a spectacular rise in deaths registered in Greater London, to a total of 4,703 - a figure more than double that for the preceding two weeks.

**Alice:** A few years later, the Government introduced the Clean Air Acts of 1956 and 1968, banning the emissions of black smoke. They wanted to avoid something like this happening again.

**Anouska:** Smog isn't a big problem in the UK anymore, but air pollution still is. It can cause conditions like asthma and lung cancer. The government continues to pass laws today, like limiting car emissions, as a way to protect the population.

**Alice:** Let's have a quick quiz to make sure we've caught the key information.

**Anouska:** Let's do it! Number one - what term is used to describe the British government's approach to public health before the 19th century? Hint, it's a French

term! It's laissez-faire, meaning a 'hands-off approach'. The government didn't really get involved in public health at the time.

**Alice:** Next question - in what year was the National Health Service, or NHS, founded? The answer is in 1948, and it was inspired by the Beveridge Report published a few years earlier in 1942.

**Anouska:** And finally, in which decade was the first national vaccination programme launched? It was in the 1940s and it was for diphtheria.

**Alice:** Thank you for listening to this episode, and a reminder that there are lots of other brilliant Bitesize podcasts.

**Anouska:** There are series for English, science, and other history topics too! Just search BBC Bitesize on BBC Sounds.

**Alice:** Join us next time where we'll be meeting the pioneering female scientists that have shaped the modern world of medicine.

**Anouska:** I can't wait for that one. Bye!