

How did ideas, beliefs and religion shape approaches to health and medicine?

Anouska: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE History podcast.

Alice: This is the series designed to help you tackle your History GCSE. I'm Alice Loxton, author and historian.

Anouska: And I'm Anouska Lewis, history podcaster. We're here to help you dive a little deeper into the history of medicine.

Alice: Every episode, we'll explore the key events, people, and concepts for your exam, as well as some exam skills.

Anouska: Sometimes you'll hear actors reading real historical accounts or imagined conversations based on historical evidence.

Alice: And at the end of every episode, we'll do a quick quiz to make sure you've caught all the key details.

Anouska: If you want to hear other episodes in this Bitesize GCSE History series, make sure you download the BBC Sounds app.

Alice: We start this story around the year 1250. Medieval Britain was not an easy place to live, was it Anouska?

Anouska: No, it wasn't. If you were living back then, chances are you'd have worked long days in agriculture, harvesting crops.

Alice: Famine was a major concern, during which people suffered from malnutrition and disease.

Anouska: If you lived in a town or city where there was overcrowding and poor hygiene, diseases spread quickly. A lot of people died before reaching adulthood. So, what were some common theories about the causes of disease?

Alice: Well at that time there wasn't much scientific knowledge, so the causes of illness were a bit of a mystery. But Catholicism was the dominant religion and the Church taught that disease was sent by God as a punishment for sin.

Anouska: Astrology was another way people explained illness. Alice, what's your star sign?

Alice: Ooh well I'm an Aquarius, why do you ask?

Anouska: Well, doctors at the time were called physicians, and they would study the planets and stars to treat their patients.

Alice: That's very different to how doctors work today, isn't it.

Anouska: Definitely.

Alice: There was limited medical progress in Britain during the Middle Ages, so ideas about medicine came from existing, ancient medical theories, and spiritual influences.

Anouska: These old medical texts had been followed for centuries, and they were written by physicians like Hippocrates.

Hippocrates: Hello!

Anouska: And Galen.

Galen: Hi there!

Anouska: They were writing in ancient Greece and Rome many centuries before the medieval period.

Alice: Well, let's have a look at some of the most popular medical theories. You might want to grab a pen to write these down.

Anouska: First up it's the theory of the four humours, which came from ancient Greek physician, Hippocrates. He believed our bodies were controlled by four humours. No not jokes, but liquids. I'll let him explain.

Hippocrates: My theory states that the body is made up of four humours; blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. These four humours must remain in balance to avoid illness.

Alice: According to Hippocrates, an excess of any of the humours could affect a person's character and could also lead to disease.

Anouska: Later, Galen, a Roman physician, developed the ideas of Hippocrates. He advised patients on how to keep their humours in balance.

Galen: The four humours must always be balanced and the excess fluid removed. For example, if a patient has too much blood, some of their blood must be removed.

Alice: That sounds logical. If it was believed that a patient's blood was out of balance, bloodletting would take place. Basically, removing some of their blood.

Anouska: And they'd do this by cutting into a vein, putting leeches on the patient, or by placing heated cups on a cut. Some basic procedures like this were done by barber surgeons.

Alice: Like barbers cut our hair today, back then barber surgeons cut people's hair and cut into their bodies for surgery. So, this four humours theory was a really popular one at the time. Another was miasma theory.

Anouska: Your what theory?

Alice: Miasma means poisoned air. People in medieval Britain believed that bad air, caused by rotting waste in the streets or dirty water, led to disease.

Anouska: So now we know what people believed the causes of disease were, how did they treat them?

Alice: Well firstly, they tried to prevent illness from happening in the first place. If God sent diseases, they thought it would help to please God by living a good life, free from sin.

Anouska: By going to church regularly, praying, and fasting - that's not eating for a period of time - they could show God how sorry they were for any sins, and so avoid disease.

Alice: And to counteract miasma, people wanted to keep the air clean. They would clean the streets and carry bunches of nice-smelling herbs and flowers.

Anouska: Ooh lovely! There were also attempts to improve sanitation, with better waste and sewage disposal.

Alice: Make sure you head to the GCSE History section of the BBC Bitesize website. You'll find even more examples of historical disease prevention there.

Anouska: So, people were looking after their spiritual health and keeping the air around them clean. But they needed to look after their physical health too.

Alice: A set of instructions called the Regimen Sanitatis, or 'Rule of Health' began circulating during the medieval period, offering advice on good health. Its guidance included things like:

Actor: Make sure you get a good night's sleep - but don't nap during the day. Keep clean - wash first thing in the morning. Make sure you get some fresh air during the day and always rest after eating.

Anouska: A lot of that sounds obvious to us now but it wasn't then! Feel free to rewind that section and make some notes if you need to.

Alice: But people still became unwell. So, what happened then?

Anouska: Well, there were hospitals, and the number actually increased during the medieval period. Most hospitals were owned by the Church and connected to monasteries or convents where monks and nuns would care for the patients.

Alice: Medieval hospitals provided food, warmth and prayers for patients to recover.

Anouska: Medieval physicians studied the theories of Hippocrates and Galen at university.

Alice: But most people wouldn't be able to pay for a physician or hospital treatment, so instead, they were looked after at home by members of the community.

Anouska: These were usually female family members with treatments passed down through generations.

Alice: Herbal remedies were also popular, combining ingredients like herbs, spices, plants, and animal parts. And sometimes, if people had enough money, they would visit apothecaries where herbal mixtures would be made for them.

Anouska: Let's hear an example of a traditional medieval remedy. This one's for treating a cough.

Actor: Take sage and rue and cumin and powder of pepper. Boil them together in honey and use a spoonful in the evening and another in the morning.

Anouska: Would you try that one Alice?

Alice: Hmm maybe if I was around in Medieval Britain!

Actor: Case study: The Black Death

Alice: In 1348, Britain was hit by a new disease called the Black Death, or the plague. And it affected everyone, rich and poor.

Anouska: It spread really quickly. Patients would develop a fever as well as painful swellings on the body, called buboes. These swellings would start in the groin, under the armpits or on the neck, but then spread across the body. A huge number of people died from the plague.

Alice: The Black Death was terrifying. People were dying really quickly, and those in medieval Britain tried some of the remedies we've already discussed, both to cure the plague and prevent it from spreading.

Anouska: They tried herbal remedies, cleaning the air, fasting, praying to God, and attempting to balance the four humours.

Alice: But it wasn't just individuals trying to prevent the plague. Some local authorities put measures in place too. For example, temporary isolation, or quarantine, was introduced to prevent the disease spreading.

Anouska: The response to the Black Death teaches us a lot about medieval medicine. When preventing and treating the plague, people relied on religious beliefs, superstition, and old theories about the causes of disease.

Alice: And since these theories were ineffective, a lot of people died, and it was clear that more practical and scientific approaches were needed in the future.

Anouska: It's time now to test our knowledge. Feel free to grab a pen to write your answers down.

Alice: First question, who were the two ancient physicians who developed the four humours theory. It was Greek physician Hippocrates and, later, Roman physician Galen.

Anouska: What was the miasma theory? The miasma theory proposed that poisoned or unclean air caused illness.

Alice: And finally, in 1348 a new disease hit England. What was it called? The Black Death. It's a useful case study of how people tried to prevent and cure disease in the medieval period. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Bitesize History podcast.

Anouska: There's lots more information on the BBC Bitesize website, and you can listen to the rest of this series on BBC Sounds.

Alice: Next time, we'll be taking a look at how scientific approaches to medicine have developed.

Anouska: See you next time!