

Health and Hygiene

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Ideas of illness

The most common cause of illness is, according to most opinions, divine judgment. Health and suffering must have origin in divine care. Other ideas about the origins of disease were bound up with astrology. The alignments of the planets and stars had significance for the health of individuals as well as communities. According to other theories, good health depended upon the good relationship between the four humors in the human body.

Dirtiness and Cleanliness

During the Middle Ages, people had a sense of spiritual cleanliness. For most of them, this kind of cleanliness was more important than their own. The relationship between cleanliness and identity required individuals to pay attention to their personal appearance. It reflected the status of their social network. There were different methods according to wealth and social class. The public bathing spread diseases rather than preventing them. Both sexes did wash their hair with a mixture of spices. A similar mixture was used for the teeth.

Diseases:

Plague

The Great Plague (also called "Black Death") was one of the most horrific events in human history. It destroyed large portions of the population and left

parts of the country completely empty of people. No doctor of medicine could help the victims. The deaths in 1348-9 were so numerous that the statistics aren't much clear.

Leprosy

Before 1348 leprosy was the most terrifying illness which people could imagine. Leprosy in the fourteen century could include all manner of skin ailments, including eczema, psoriasis and lupus. If you were infected you were forced to wear a covering cloak and to ring a bell wherever you could go and you were regarded as one of the living dead.

Tuberculosis

As leprosy declined, tuberculosis was on the rise. This was an infectious disease which came in many sizes and you could get it from drinking infected cows' milk. It's interesting that tuberculosis had a supposed cure: the person of the king had the power to alleviate the suffering by touching the sufferer.

Medical Practitioners

Physicians

If you fell ill you would need to seek out a physician or doctor of medicine, but qualified physicians were rare. There were probably fewer than a hundred medical degree holders in the whole of England. They could establish your illness using the positions of the Sun and of the Moon. An alternative was to go to the hospital.

Surgeons

Surgeons were more commonly found than physicians. They varied in skill and experience from barbers to highly experienced medical professionals as skilled as the best physicians. The principal barber's service was shaving and trimming beards, but they could also let blood to maintain good health.

Bibliography

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