

Law in a Time of Plague

Was the law a good doctor?

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Introduction

Plagues killed a quarter of the population in London in 1665

There were special horrors:-

Putrid matter emanating from sores

Breath foul smelling

Highly significant pain

Rapid transmission

Heavy social disruption

Commercial discord

More recently:-

Public health and antibiotics – less serious

Not disappeared and never well

Smallpox is the only irradiated infectious disease

Pandemics - Biological Diversity

Zoonoses – diseases shared between man and animals

Types: Bacterial – bubonic - black death – great plague 1665
 Viral – Spanish flu
 Parasitic – malaria

Spread through:-

Air - coronavirus

Sexual contact - e.g. HIV/AIDS

Contaminated food and water – cholera

Excrement -

Vectors - e.g., mosquitoes, lice and fleas

Plagues in the Past

Plague of Justinian 542

Bubonic plague 1346-1353

(Black death killed approximately a third of Europe)

The Great Plague 1665

Cholera

Tuberculosis

Spanish flu 1918

Aids 1981-

Ebola 1995-

SARS 2002

Avian flu 2020

Covid 19

Black Death 1347-1352

Misnomer went blue

A third of the population of Europe died

Reshaped the course of history

Psychological impact – destroyed confidence in the future

Affected social architecture

Plague of 1665

Wake with fever and chills
Weakness, diarrhoea and vomiting
Bleeding mouth and rectum
Buboes - swollen lymph nodes in the armpits and groins
Death in considerable agony

Spread by rat born fleas
Bacterium yersinia pestis (1895)
Yersin - a student of Pasteur
More recent data of human to human transmission with human fleas and body lice (human ectoparasitic transmission)

Isaac Newton (1642-1727) first conceived of the law of gravity during a lockdown

Bubonic plague still exists in parts of the USA and possibly North Korea

Pandemics

First circa 541 to circa 750 - Mediterranean and Europe
Plague of Justinian

Second circa 1347 to circa 1771 in Europe.
Black Death, Great Plague 1665

Third 1894 to 1922 China and Indian

Impact of the Plague

Population cut by a third

Labour became scarce – its price rose

Distribution of wealth shifted - Living standards improved

Distribution of impact

- Samuel Pepys in 1665
- Looked at mortality in different parishes and showed they were concentrated in the poor areas
- Moved his wife out to Woolwich
- Said that nobody would dare to buy a wig for fear that the hair had come off a plague victim
- Transmission across trade routes

Royal College of Physicians

Founded in 1518

Royal Charter through Parliament 1523

Advice on 'measures' requested by the Queen

Founded the idea of Public Health:-

Hygiene

Air pollution

Food sanity

Population density

Social distancing

Early Responses to the Plague

Excessive blood, hot and wet humors

Bloodletting

Emetics

Purgatives

Induction of sweating

Theriac – opium, cinnamon

plus other herbs mixed with honey

Did little to prolong life!

Later Responses to the Plague Circa 1630 (RCP)

Flight

Cleansing

Self defence – spices
– herbs
– vinegar
– smoking

Plague costumes for physicians and priests

Public Health

Boards of health – plague commissioners

Salus Populi Suprema Lex Esto (*the health of the people is the highest law*)

Quarantine (Quaranta 40)

Then and Now

	1665	2021
Social inequalities	✓	✓
King isolating in Windsor	✓	✓
Gatherings banned	✓	✓
Ale houses banned	✓	✓
Theatres shut	✓	✓
Trade stopped	✓	✓
Scotland border closed		✓
Vaccination		✓

Shakespeare and the Plague

16th century a couple in Stratford-upon-Avon lost two children to bubonic plague

The couple barricaded themselves to protect their three month old son William who survived.

A quarter of the population of Stratford killed in the year of William Shakespeare's birth

Shakespeare and the Plague

Wrote King Lear during the plague

Theatres shut for 60% of the time from 1603 to 1613

'Tut Sir. I could have told you more. In these time you stand your distance'

Merry Wives of Windsor Act 2 Scene 1 Mistress Page

Romeo and Juliet, background of Plague in Verona

Interrupting communication – Friar John delivering Juliet's letter

Spanish Flu

102 years ago someone travelled to a small town in Alaska

They became sick

72 of the 90 population died within a week

Exhumed recently - Spanish flu virus (influenza) still in the lungs

Estimated to have killed 50 million people

Estimated in WW1 (military and civilians) 17 million

Estimated in WW2 (military and civilians) 60 million

Treatments of Covid

Recovery Trial

37,383 participants

178 active sites

University of Oxford

National Institute of Health Research

Wellcome Trust

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

NHS set up

World leading

Treatment of Covid

Recovery Trial

Dexamethasone (steroid)

Deaths lower on ventilated patients 29.3% vs. 41.4%

With oxygen non ventilated 23.3% deaths vs. 26.2% deaths

Tocilizumab (anti-inflammatory) deaths reduced from 33% to 29%

Delay in Instituting Recommendations

Politicians vs. Scientists

21st September until 5 November

21 September - 5600 cases, 1:500 infected, 33 deaths

14th October - 19,706 cases, 1:150, 133 deaths

5th November - 23,746 cases, 1:85 infected, 369 died

Benefits of Epidemics

Research } Vaccination
 } Genomics UK World Class

Healthcare infrastructure

International collaboration

Health education

“the only defence of humans is their wits”

Conclusion

The law is probably not a good doctor

But neither are the doctors (although they are getting better)

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