The Renaissance battle of ideas: tradition versus change

One of the main features of the Renaissance was a slow change from respect for tradition to the search for change. If you think of this as a boxing match, tradition have not out enquirer in the Middle Ages. This wasn’t surprising, as tradition had the experienced and powerful Christian church in its corner.

What helped change fightback? The Black Death began to encourage change back on its feet. Survivors were paid higher wages because employers had to attract workers. Some people spend the money on Education their children and in time education helped trigger the Renaissance.

Renaissance means ‘re-birth’. The Renaissance was a time of re-born interest in all things Greek and Roman – their books, ideas, buildings and sculptures. The development of printing helped people publish many new editions of Greek and Roman books, including nearly 600 editions of Galen’s books.

This work changed attitudes. People now realised that the Greeks had loved enquiry – asking questions, challenging old ideas and suggesting new ones. If it was OK for the Greeks to ask questions and challenge old ideas, then so could the people of the Renaissance! One famous example is that Copernicus, a Polish scientist, proved that the Earth revolves around the sun. Until then it was believed that the sun circled the Earth.

So, what was also re-born was a love of enquiry and willingness to challenge existing ideas. Once they began to ask questions some people began to realise that Galen had not known everything – and had even made mistakes!

Of course, not everyone agreed. Many people stuck to tradition, still saying it was wrong to challenge Galen. So, what developed between 1500 and 1700 was a battle between attitudes – between tradition, people defending the old ideas, and people seeking change and improvement.

Explaining the pattern of change 1500-1700

The history of medicine in this period looks like a signpost pointing in two different directions. Some events point back to the middle ages, two medical ideas and methods that are very familiar. Other developments point forward – although people at the time could not see that part of the signpost at all clearly. They did not know what was going to happen.

King Charles II provides a good example of this two-way signpost – the details on the signpost (below) shows how Charles’s involvement in science in medicine points both forward and back in time.

However, this change was very slow. Methods of treating and preventing illness was not changing. This is partly because some treatments, such as some herbal remedies, did work. The methods used to prevent the spread of disease had been very logical and did help a little. However, the biggest reason by far why methods of treating and preventing disease had not changed was because understanding of the causes of disease had not changed. Remember, treatment and prevention have always been directly linked to ideas about causes of disease.

Ideas about the causes of disease and illness

Ideas about the causes of disease and illness did not change in the Renaissance period. People’s lives were still dominated by religion, so they continued to believe that God sent sickness.

Bad air still a common explanation because the increasingly crowded towns were dirty and full of human and animal waste which created awful smells which made the air seem ‘bad’. Physicians were still working hard to improve the workings of Hippocrates and Galen, so they continued to accept the Theory of the four humours.

Therefore, the plague of 1665 was explained in the same ways as the Black Death of 1348-49.

Methods of treatments

Continues in ideas about causes meant that there was a great deal of continuity in treatments. The discoveries of Vesalius (in anatomy) and Harvey (in physiology) did not lead to changes in treatments either. Physicians continue to believe in bleeding and purging, although, in the late 1600s, doctors such as Thomas Sydenham challenged the use of these treatments and what more likely to prescribe the rest and ams, recte rhymes and, far more helpfully, use herbal remedies that they knew from experience did lead to recovery. Some new remedies which introduced as a result of overseas contacts. Some, such as tobacco, did harm more than good, but others proved helpful, such as the bark of the cinchona tree from the South America – known as quinine – which was a good remedy for fevers.

Preventing disease and illness

We have more evidence about how people tried to prevent the spread of the plague in 1665 than we do about how they tried to prevent the Black death in 1349. Researchers examine the methods the what the people. People tried to keep the bad air moving or to overcome it with other smells by burning bonfires in the streets or carrying bunches of herbs which they hoped would keep the plague at bay. Victims of plague were quarantined in their homes and pusthouses although it was not possible to stop some escaping all to make sure all victims were quarantined. Prayer was still an important part of prevention for individuals and for the government which awarded special days of prayer for forgiveness.

The Medical Renaissance in England, 1500-1700

Enquiry: Was there really so little progress in medicine 1500-1700? The fact of being trained to change or continuity – remember the same factors can explain both change and continuity!

Attitudes: seeking improvement

- New ideas about science encouraged people to challenge old ideas
- There was still very few trained doctors and scientists so there were very few people to try to find new ideas

Communications

- The development of printing spread details of new ideas and discoveries far faster than in the past
- Groups such as the Royal society helped to spread news of new experiments and discoveries

Institution: The Church

- The church was still very powerful, and people were told that God controlled every aspect of life.

Institution: Government

- Governments did not spend money on trying to improve people’s health or finding out more about medicine apart from when there was a major outbreak of plague
- Methods of preventing the spread of the plague were already carefully thought out and organised.

Individuals

- New discoveries by Vesalius and Harvey did not improve anyone’s health at the time but did improve knowledge.
- Doctors such as Thomas Sydenham was more prepared to learn from their daily experience rather than from books.

Science and technology

- Technology was gradually improving so that new equipment such as microscopes made new discoveries possible
- Discoveries in other areas of science such as astronomy encouraged doctors to seek new knowledge in medicine

Attitudes: respect for tradition

- Some herbal remedies worked and encourage people to keep the old ways of treating illness.
- The work of Galen and other ancient doctors was still a central part of medical training for doctors
- Doctors believed in the complete accuracy of Galen’s work so long that it was very hard to change that view.
- Ideas about what caused disease had not changed despite changes in scientific thinking

The History of Medicine

- Factors that explain change and continuity
- gradual – significant – turning point – breakthrough – impact – relevance
- Golden words that help you link your arguments:
  - On the one hand... on the other... – in some ways... but in others... – at the end... – Overall, the evidence shows... – At the beginning of this... – The race of change...

Key events, people and institutions!

Case Study: The Great Plague in London, 1665

People: Thomas Sydenham (English Hippocrates)? – William Harvey (The circulation of blood) – Andreas Vesalius (Breakthroughs in anatomy)

Institution: The Royal Society, 1662

Word Wall – Words related to:

- The History of Medicine:
- Factors that explain change and continuity
  - gradual – significant – turning point – breakthrough – impact – relevance
- Golden words that help you link your arguments:
  - On the one hand... on the other... – in some ways... but in others... – at the end... – Overall, the evidence shows... – At the beginning of this... – The race of change...

Practice questions:

1. Explain the key way in which people’s reactions to plague were similar in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. How are they different?
2. In what ways do people’s reactions to plague differ from the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries?
3. Explain why such changes took place in medicine during the period 1500-1700.
4. Explain how the discovery of the circulation of blood was a major breakthrough in medical knowledge during the period 1500-1700. How do you agree? Explain your answer.
5. Explain what Enquiry: Was there really so little progress in medicine 1500-1700? The fact of being trained to change or continuity – remember the same factors can explain both change and continuity!
6. Vesalius’s work on anatomy was a major breakthrough in medical knowledge during the period 1500-1700. How do you agree? Explain your answer.
7. Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood was a major breakthrough in medical knowledge during the period 1500-1700. How do you agree? Explain your answer.