Medieval attitudes – the example of Hippocrates and Galen.

People respected traditional ideas. Doctors therefore followed ideas of Hippocrates who lived over 1500 years earlier in Ancient Greece. Claudius Galen was also Greek but worked in Rome 500 years after Hippocrates and was even more respected. He wrote over 300 medical books that were still trusted by doctors in the Middle Ages.

They believed that people became sick because they were out of balance.

The key ideas of Hippocrates and Galen

The body contains four Humours or liquids: blood, phlegm, yolk and bile black bile. When we are healthy these Humours are perfectly balanced in our bodies, but we fall sick when we have too much or too little of one of these Humours. You can see the evidence when you are sick, and your body gets rid of excess Humours.

Word Wall – Words related to:

The History of Medicine:

Factors that explain change and continuity

The church – Respect for tradition – Attitudes

Make your arguments/ideas clear to reader


Golden words that help you link your arguments:
This led to…. – this meant that…. – this resulted in.

Medieval ideas about the causes of disease and illness

Medieval ideas were so different from ours that it is easy to think they were just based on superstition or magic. That people were ignorant and even stupid. This is not the case. Most medieval ideas about what caused disease were rational and logical, fitting people’s ideas about how the world behaved. They believed that God controlled everything, so god must send disease and illness. Ideas that blamed bad air and the movement of planets were also linked to God because it was god who made the planets move or sent the bad air to spread disease.

Physicians continued to believe in the Theory of the Four Humours which had been developed by Hippocrates in Ancient Greece and continued by Galen. This too was a rational theory because the Humours, such as blood and phlegm, were often seen when someone was sick.

Methods of treatments

The Theory of the Four Humours led directly to bleeding and purging which were carried out to rebalance the Humours and so restore health. Physicians also recommended more exercise, changes in diet, and rest. They treated the wealthy who recommended more exercise, changes in diet, and rest. They treated the wealthy who could not afford to pay their fees, but these ideas did reach more people by the fourteenth century because they were written down in books summarising how to be healthy.

Most illnesses were treated by mothers and local women with specialist knowledge. Herbal remedies were widely used and often contained ingredients such as honey and plantain that we now know do help cure infections. Many herbal ingredients are used in modern medicines. However, there were also many magical attempts at cures, and people prayed to God to help recover or were a caring of a saint who might help them. Simple surgery was carried out on the exterior of the body and some surgeons became very skilful.

Preventing disease and illness

Reactions to the Black death very much by methods of preventing disease. People prayed for God to put an end to the pestilence, they went on pilgrimage and took part in religious processions. The king demanded that the streets of towns be cleaned to get rid of bad air and local town councils made great efforts to clean up, employing more people to cleanse the streets. People used herbs to try to keep away the bad air.

At other times great efforts were made to prevent illnesses or diseases. Physicians recommended regular bleeding and purging to prevent the fluid in body, urine and the cause of illness. Town councils and many individual spent money on ways of improving conditions – building public toilets, cleaning water supplies, cleaning the streets – but there was never enough money to deal with the many problems in towns.

Enquiry: Why was there so little change in medicine in the middle ages?

The main factors:

The church

Until the 1500s there was only one religious organisation in Europe – the Christian Church led by the Pope in Rome, Italy. The church was extremely rich because it owned a great deal of land in every country. It was also very powerful because it had a priest in every village and a bishop in every region. Through its bishops and priests, it controlled education.

3 ways in which the church made it difficult for new medical ideas to develop:

• The church had a major influence on people’s ideas about what caused disease. The Bible said that God controlled every aspect of life, so it was logical that God also sent diseases. They also believed that God had sent the Black death to punish them for their sins. So, if God sent diseases this meant that there was no need to look for other causes. This was an important reason why ideas about what caused disease did not change.

• The Pope, bishops and priests told people that everything in the Bible – what’s true and you could not challenge what the Bible said. If anyone did dare to challenge the Bible or the Church, they were told they would go to hell when they died. In the middle ages people believed that Hell was a real place where people who did not go to Church in life would spend their eternity. God sent diseases this meant that there was no need to look for other causes. This was an important reason why ideas about what caused disease did not change.

• The church is the supported the ideas of Galen. Galen had not been a Christian, but he had said that the body had been created by one God who made all the parts of the body fit together perfectly. The Christian church said that God created human beings on did not make mistakes, so that all two ideas fitted together perfectly. As a result, the church supported Galen’s work, and this meant that no Christian dared to question Galen’s ideas. If you question Galen, you would be accused of challenging the church and God.

Medicine in medieval England, 1250-1500

Education

This factor is strongly linked to the influence of the church because the Church controlled education, including how physicians were trained at universities. There were in fact very few physicians in England (see you at that 100 in the 1300s), partly because the training took seven years I very few people could afford the cost.

The main part of doctors training was reading the books of Hippocrates and Galen, along with translations of books by Arab doctors such as Ibn Sina (known as Avicenna in Europe) and al-Razi (known as Rhazes). These Arab writers included many of the ideas that had been developed by ancient civilizations. Doctors began to believe that Hippocrates and especially Galen work correctly in every detail. This meant that doctors were not encouraged to experiment or to think for themselves about what caused disease or about how to treat diseases. Following the work of Galen was all that was needed.

A good example of this total belief in Galen comes from how doctors learned about anatomy – the structure of the body. Doctors attended dissections of human bodies (as Galen had recommended) but they were not trying to make new discoveries. Dissections was simply another way of demonstrating that Galen’s descriptions of the human body were correct. The trainee doctors just watched a surgeon carry out the dissection while a section of one of Galen’s books was read aloud. This meant that hardly anyone tried to find out more about the structure of the human body or how it worked.

Attitudes: Respect for tradition

The result of the influence of the Church and of the way doctors were educated was that most people had great respect for the past and for traditional ideas. They wanted to keep everything as it was (this attitude can also be called conservative) unless there was a very, very good reason for change! In any case it was hard for new ideas to spread because books were written out by hand until printing came to England in the 1470s. Only after that were books manufactured in large numbers.

Later in history doctors and scientists believed it was important to question and test older ideas and not to just rely on books written in the past. This was a vital change in attitude which led too many important breakthroughs, but this attitude did not develop in the middle ages. This meant that doctors were not trained to challenge existing ideas. What happened to one man was a warning to everyone else. When the English scientist Roger Bacon (1214-92) suggested that doctors should do their own research and carry out experiments he was a thrown into prison by Church leaders.

Individuals

Later in history some of the most important breakthroughs were the work of determined and inspired individuals. History, Pasteur, and others made a great breakthrough in the Middle Ages. One reason was that education was very limited and controlled by the Church which did not encourage new ideas. As a result, the key individuals in medieval medicine were Hippocrates and Galen – who had died centuries earlier.

Galen’s work was especially important in the Middle Ages. He built on the work of Hippocrates and wrote over 300 works on medicine. These were the main books studied by doctors throughout the Middle Ages. He made new discoveries, especially about the anatomy of the body. Galen, unlike Hippocrates, thought it was very important to dissect dead bodies to find out more about anatomy and about how the body works. E.g., he proved that the brain controls speech and that arteries carry blood round the body.

However, doctors did not just believe Hippocrates and Galen because they were trained to follow old ideas. There were two parts of their work that persuaded doctors their ideas were right.

There seemed to be evidence to prove their ideas were correct. People’s symptoms when they were sick seemed to show that the Theory of the four Humours was correct. When a medieval doctor saw a sick patient he often saw one of the Humours. E.g. a sick person might vomit yellow bile or black bile or sneeze phlegm or have a nosebleed. This sickness seemed to prove that the body was unbalanced and trying to get rid of too much of one Humour. Just as importantly, nobody suggested an alternative theory about what caused disease that was more persuasive or had more evidence to support it.

Institution: Government

Since the early 20th century governments have spent a great deal of money on medical research and care. This has played a major part in improving medicine. In the middle ages the Kings government never did this. The major tasks of the King were to defend the country in war and to keep the country peaceful. Kings did order towns to be cleaned (as Edward III did in 1349 during the Black Death) but they did not do this regularly and did not pay for cleaning. No taxes were collected by the Kings government to improve people’s health on medicine. This meant that no money was spent to find medical breakthroughs.