c1250–c1500: Medicine in medieval England

Ideas about the cause of disease and illness, supernatural and religious explanations of the cause of disease. The belief that illness was a punishment from God, the Church’s influence and resulting continuity in beliefs about the cause of disease.

The use of astrology in the diagnosis and treatment of illness, representing a new development in this time period.

Rational explanations: The Theory of the Four Humours, created by Hippocrates in Ancient Greece and developed by Galen in Ancient Rome; promoted by the Church and used widely by doctors.

Rational explanations: Miasma - the idea of disease being caused by bad air and foul smells.

The role of attitudes in society: supernatural and religious explanations of illness.

Approaches to prevention and treatment and their connection with ideas about disease and illness: religious actions, prayer, flagellation, bloodletting and purging, purifying the air, and the use of remedies.

New and traditional approaches to hospital care in the thirteenth century. The role of the physician, apothecary and barber surgeon in treatment and care provided within the community and in hospitals, c1250–1500.

The role of individuals and institutions: the Church’s provision of some hospital care; the Church’s influence over medical training for physicians, leading to continuity in this area.

Herbal remedies from the apothecary or mixed at home - most common form of treatment.

Hospitals provided by the Church as centres for recuperation rather than for the sick.

Treatment and care for most sick people at home by the women of the household.

Availability of physicians only for the rich.

Apothecaries and barber surgeons: provided herbal remedies and carried out small surgeries, such as the treatment of haemorrhoids.

The role of individuals and institutions: local government clearance of foul-smelling areas, such as overflowing cesspits, due to the belief in miasma.

The role of attitudes in society: preventative actions and treatments based on supernatural and religious beliefs.

Case study - Dealing with the Black Death, 1348–49; approaches to treatment and attempts to prevent its spread.

Religious methods included prayers, donations to the Church and flagellation.

A very broad spread of other treatments, including charms, potions and sitting in sewers to drive away the miasma.

Some rudimentary attempts at quarantine (not often successful).

The role of individuals and institutions: the Church’s promotion of religious methods to tackle the disease.

The role of individuals and institutions: introduction by local government of some measures to keep streets clean and free from excessively noxious smells.

The role of attitudes in society: attitudes were fatalistic: if it was God’s will, you would die.