

Health and Medicine

Medieval medicine was very primitive, especially during the early Middle Ages from 500 to 1000. For centuries, medical practice was associated with religion and ritual. Since many people thought that disease was caused by demons, they believed cures could only be attained through such methods as prayer, sacrifice, and the wearing of amulets, or magic charms. It was believed that a common form of tuberculosis could be cured by the touch of a king's hand. Therefore, people who wished to rid themselves of the disease sought help from kings. It is said that one French king "touched" 1500 afflicted people at one sitting.

Much of medieval medicine was based on the theories of Hippocrates, an ancient Greek physician. His theories state that disease was caused by an excess of one of the four humours (basic fluids) in the human body: black bile, blood, phlegm, and yellow bile. As a result of Hippocrates' theories, a typical treatment for disease in the Middle Ages was bloodletting. This procedure involved letting blood flow out of a vein in order to release the excess humour. Other typical treatments for disease included giving the patient substances to induce vomiting, purgatives to empty the bowels, or diuretics to increase the release of urine. With such primitive methods, the death



rate was high. One epidemic, the bubonic plague or "Black Death," is estimated to have killed from one-fourth to one-half of Europe's population in the fourteenth century.

Thanks to knowledge that trickled into Europe as a result of the Crusades (religious wars that took place between 1096 and 1291), some medical advances did take place in the latter part of the Middle Ages. For example, people began to realize that disease has natural causes. However, the poor hygiene of the day resulted in a short life expectancy for nobles and serfs. Human waste was dumped onto the streets, and pigs and other animals roamed freely in houses and around towns. Disease was very hard to control.