

Public health - Revision

As societies became more organised and settlements grew, public health became an issue for the people and the governments that controlled them. It usually refers to factors affecting the general standard of living and working conditions which prevent diseases from spreading. These are often connected with measures of **hygiene** such as:

- a clean water supply and toilets.
- drains and sewers to take away dirty water.

Town planning is also an important factor connected with public health because this takes away the need for individual landlords to provide:

- a water supply.
- drains to remove waste products.

a rubbish removal service.

The Ancient Egyptians, Romans and Greeks

We know very little about public health in prehistoric medicine. But we do know that the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all thought that cleanliness was important. This was usually connected with religion rather than health.

The link between cleanliness and health may not have been understood, so this idea didn't survive into the Middle Ages, except among monks and nuns.

We know that the **Ancient Egyptians** stressed the importance of hygiene because Herodotus described how the Egyptians, and especially the priests, washed frequently. They associated water with health and life because they relied on the river Nile for so many things, for example the irrigation of their crops.

The **Greeks** also emphasised cleanliness, as we know from pictures on Greek vases and comments in written works. Hygiene was associated with health, so bathing was an important part of treatment in the Asklepeion.

The **Romans** felt that cleanliness was so important that public baths were built and everyone in the town had access to them.

We know that they thought clean water and drainage was important because the government paid for aqueducts and sewers to be built.

The Middle Ages

Look at these sources and decide which one:

- shows that the level of public health declined in the medieval period.
- suggests the link between health and hygiene had been realised.

Source A

Almost all the floors are of clay and rushes from the marshes, so carelessly renewed that the foundation sometimes remains for twenty years, harbouring there below, spittle and vomit and urine of dogs and men, beer that hath been cast forth, remnants of fishes and filth unnamable.

Taken from a letter by Erasmus, a Dutch visitor to England, in 1524, describing the floors inside houses.

Source B

Item, that so much dung and filth of the garbage and entrails be cast and put into ditches, rivers, and other waters... so that the air there is grown greatly corrupt and infected, and many maladies and other intolerable diseases do daily happen... it is accorded and assented, that the proclamation be made as well in the city of London, as in other cities, boroughs, and towns through the realm of England, where it shall be needful that all they who do cast and lay all such annoyances, dung, garbages, entrails, and other ordure, in ditches, rivers, waters, and other places aforesaid, shall cause them utterly to be removed, avoided, and carried away, every one upon pain to lose and forfeit to our Lord the King [the sum of 20 pounds...]

Parliamentary statute of 1388.

Read both sources through carefully and then have a look at the answers:

Source A - suggests that public health declined during the medieval period because it shows that house floors were full of rubbish and no one realised the connection between cleanliness and health.

Source B - says that laws were being passed to try to make towns cleaner and this suggests they **did** realise the importance of hygiene.

It is difficult to say whether this shows a decline in standards because the two sources give different impressions.

One way to reconcile this contradiction would be to say that people didn't bother about public health for most of the time, but there would be a panic if the situation got too bad or there was an epidemic.

Another explanation could be that people had different attitudes towards hygiene depending on the area or the times they lived in.

The 1800's

Before this time nothing had been done about public health for many years. Two important reasons for this inactivity were that:

- most governments felt they should not interfere too much in people's lives.
- any large scale public health improvements would be very expensive.

In the industrial period many factories were built and towns grew up nearby. The housing conditions were often very poor. The government was forced to intervene due to extreme conditions. An example of two of these are:

- an increase in diseases such as typhoid and cholera.
- because of the work of **Edwin Chadwick** which showed the connection between health and hygiene.

The key issue here is the increasing involvement of the government and this continued into the 20th century with various acts to provide better medical care, higher standards of living and improved working conditions for everyone.

Government and public health

In an attempt to control the living and working environment of the people, the government aimed to improve public health by passing a number of **acts**.

To help you remember these acts you can classify them in various ways:

- **hygiene**
- **housing**
- **working conditions**
- **medical care**

You can also divide them into those acts which:

- forced people to take action.
- only encouraged them to do something.
- set up national standards.
- were aimed at local governments.
- only dealt with one thing
- others included a wide range of topics.

Here are the acts and the key points they were aiming to enforce:

- **1834 Poor Law Amendment Act** - Medical officers were appointed to workhouses which provided basic medical care for the poor.
- **1848 Act (General Board of Health)** - The General Board of Health was created and although it was abolished 10 years later, the act also encouraged local boards of health to be set up to appoint a medical officer, provide sewers, inspect lodging houses and check food which was offered for sale.
- **1853 Act** - Vaccinations were made compulsory although no-one was given the power to enforce them.
- **1855 Nuisance Removal Act** - This act made overcrowded housing illegal.
- **1864 Factory Act** - This made unhealthy conditions in the factories illegal.
- **1866 Sanitary Act** - This made local authorities responsible for sewers, water and street cleaning.
- **1868 Act** - This encouraged the improvement of slum housing or its demolition.
- **1871 Vaccinations Act** - This made sure that the previous vaccinations act was obeyed.
- **1875 Artisans Dwelling Act** - This made the house owners responsible for keeping their properties in good order and gave local authorities the right to buy and demolish slums if they were not improved.
- **1875 Public Health Act** - This brought together a range of acts covering sewerage and drains, water supply, housing and disease.