We've been here before! – Epidemics and our reaction to them

The 1918 'flu epidemic is the best documented one so far, and is recent enough to be in folklore; my husband's great grandmother died of that 'flu. However, there have been a great many other epidemics. They were usually less severe, but some stand out.

The first references that fit the influenza profile are in 1386-87, when the victims were mainly elderly or debilitated. The 16th century saw many challenges to health. There was a relatively mild, but virulent strain of 'flu in 1510, which originated in Africa. From the late 1400s, recurrent, though relatively small epidemics erupted of the deadly 'Sweating Sickness', which killed two young men in my family in 1551. Their brother may well have been a victim of a severe 'flu epidemic in 1557-59. This 'flu, which had spread from Asia, caused a high rate of death from "pleurisy and fatal peripneumony". Then in 1580 came another deadly strain travelling through Africa from Asia. And, of course, there was the ever present Bubonic Plague. The worst pandemic 'flu between the 16th and 20th centuries was in 1729. The first cases were reported in St Petersburg and quickly spread across Europe with deadly effect.

Do these measures and problems look familiar?

- No competitive sports; and no football
- No theatres, dancing, bowling or ballad singing
- Fairs (i.e. regional, national and international markets, with entertainment alongside) prohibited.
- Jury cases suspended.
- Infected people not to attend church - windows were sometimes removed, so that people could stand outside.
- All infected people to stay at home, but can go out to earn their living, provided they carry a white rod.
    - THEN (1563) forbidden to go out; fine for disobedience £5. Non-infected contacts can carry on as normal.
        - THEN (from 1564): whole household shut in for 40 days. An "honest, sad and discreet" person toprovide food, fuel and other necessaries. Penalty: imprisonment, or disfranchisement (for Freemen).
- In the 1570s, you could remove to a second home.
- Poorer people just fled to the countryside, sleeping in barns or going to relatives, often taking the infection in their clothes and bedding; and "On the holidays they come forth of the City, in such numbers to all the villages about London" *[William Waad, clerk to the Privy Council, 1603].*
- "Don't come to your second home! Don't come out of town!" cried the provinces. In 1625 the Essex Assizes enacted that all Londoners, including traders, must be quarantined for fourteen days.
- Banning traders backfired – Essex needed to sell its agricultural produce, and London was desperate for supplies. The rules had to be relaxed, but markets and rendezvous had to be outside of the infected city.
- Once Plague had abated in London, people from infected areas outside came into town for the social life!
- The Court and Parliament became peripatetic, moving as far as Salisbury in 1603.
- Exports were blocked – France refused to accept English goods in 1603.
- With cloth not being traded in London, thousands of workers around the country were laid off.
- Business ground to a halt, as sellers and lenders could not guarantee that their creditors would be able (or even alive) to pay them. It was, in any case, difficult to conduct transactions.
- Farmers could not sell their animals and produce, and were in danger of going bust. Graziers and middlemen could not trade. Hop growers had no outlets, with the Fairs being closed, so a beer crisis loomed!
- Londoners could not sell their goods, either to the depleted and impoverished local population, or to the provinces where no one would touch their wares.
- Essentials, such as coal, rocketed in price (from 12s to 33s in March 1626).
- King James I found the Plague a good excuse to prorogue Parliament several times!
- Westminster, Whitehall, the Strand, the Inns of Court, the Post, the Royal Exchange - all deserted (1625)
- Confined in Chelsea, John Donne revised and wrote out his sermons.
- Spring 1625 was abnormally wet, with floods ruining meadows and pasture, and sheep suffering foot-rot. *Familiar? Our weather is ever fickle, though we express surprise every year!*

It was Henry VIII's civil service in the shape of Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas More that woke up to the fact that England was, surprise, surprise, behind the continent on measures against the Plague. Italy probably had the best systems all along, and its later strictures probably prevented Plague regaining hold in Europe in the eighteenth century. In 1518 London followed the practice in Paris of instructing households with a case of Plague to place a bundle of straw and a white wand outside their house. This was succeeded later by the cross on the door. Shrewsbury and York began to segregate patients in the 1530s. By the 1550s, York had a watchman to police travel over the Ouse bridge, but also raised a levy on each parish for the support of the infected and the poor. Slowly, other places, most notably ports such as Liverpool and Newcastle, followed suit. London did nothing beyond painting doors until after the horrific outbreak in 1563.

Influenced by an Italian physician Cesare Adelmare, William Cecil ordered that infected houses be shut up for 40 days. In 1578 orders were issued that prevailed in some form until after 1665. At times of epidemic:

- Magistrates to meet every three weeks to receive reports from the "viewers" or "searchers" and to devise taxation for the relief of the sick.
- Clothes and bedding of victims to be burnt; funerals to take place at dusk, to reduce the number attending.
- Houses of the infected must be shut up for at least six weeks, with all household members inside.
- Watchmen would enforce this order, but officers should ensure the inmates were provided with food.
- Work such as tending animals could only continue if the dwelling was remote from others, and those in isolation must wear a distinguishing mark on their clothing or carry a white stick.

Compliance was erratic. The City of London claimed that churches must raise their own funds, although the majority of cases were in poorer parishes. In 1583, London had isolation for just four weeks, with one person per household allowed out to get food. There were valid arguments that shutting up the healthy with the sick increased the death toll, but the only pest house was a small one built in 1594 in St Giles Cripplegate. Not until 1608 after five continuous years of infection did London introduce a weekly tax in infected parishes and stop anyone leaving a shut-up house for provisions.

A weather eye, though, was kept on outbreaks around the country. When students fled their plague-ridden university city, for example, they were not welcomed in their home town until quarantined.

Two of the worst years of Plague coincided with a change of monarch. This was particularly significant in 1603, after 45 years under Elizabeth. A huge entourage came down from Scotland to serve King James or to better themselves in London; great numbers from London and elsewhere thronged the court and the entourage, in hope of preferment, or just out of curiosity. The authorities had their eye off the ball, and took a long time to implement protective measures.

Road and river access to Westminster was barred for James's coronation in July, and the King's triumphant passage and pageant through the city was scaled down, put off, and finally postponed till the winter. In 1625, James I's funeral was ceremony was abridged, and Charles's coronation postponed.

By 1630, the king and Parliament were so concerned about the disruption caused by Plague in– there had been an awful epidemic in 1625 - that the Privy Council issued advice to the City of London:

- New pesthouses should be built in the City and Westminster, on the lines of the Hôpital Saint Louis in Paris.
- Recommendations were made for a single authority to implement measures, including addressing vagrancy, overcrowding, bad hygiene and inadequate food supplies. It should also cover the suburbs.

The Protectorate had an eye on the dangers from abroad, and quarantined Dutch ships for twenty days in 1655, but by the 1660s, with no significant epidemic in London (though not elsewhere) for a generation, the ports were slower to act. Ships from infected ports on the continent were quarantined for up to 40 days in 1664, but it was clear that Plague was taking hold. London finally built more pesthouses, but they could take only a fraction of the sick. Confinement of those living with victims proved hard to enforce. Ironically, in May 1666 the Privy Council ordered that every town was to build a pesthouse, and the sick were to be removed thither or to sheds or huts. Healthy members of the household would still be quarantined for forty days.

Measures were often late, often half-hearted, and often misguided. By the time Plague had taken hold, local government and social structures were falling apart, and once the epidemic had died down, the focus was on getting everything back and running, rather than looking to the next time.

There were, of course, vested interests and prejudices. The rich did not readily support poor parishes, particularly those outside London's city boundary. The church saw opportunities to quash frivolous activities that incurred the wrath of God; for less devout reasons, the monied classes welcomed a clampdown on activities that distracted the workers from their tasks, and on drinking.

Theatres were an anathema. The City Fathers write to the Privy Council c.1584: "To play in plague-time is to increase the plague by infection: to play out of plague-time is to draw the plague by offendings of God upon occasion of such plays"

It is interesting to note that taxes had to be raised to support the afflicted and those who could not earn a living. In fact, insufficient money was raised, and that did not trickle down to where it was most needed, causing more suffering and a rise in crime. It does seem, however, that neighbours and relatives helped to keep households supplied (and sometimes to escape).

Such regulations as there were proved hard to enforce. In Norwich in the 1590s, a ban on gatherings led to "unlawful assemblies" outside town. Bans on playing in the street when schools had been closed were virtually unenforceable. There were restrictions on the numbers that could attend funerals (just 6 in 1603 in London), weddings, christenings and childbirth. These were, however, frequently breached.

When Plague hit Marseille in 1720, the British Government passed a rigorous Quarantine Act. Following French practice, it even provided for armed guards to set up a 'cordon sanitaire' around infected towns. Infected households would have to move to a hospital or other place of isolation, on pain of death! The Government's medical adviser Dr Richard Mead advocated stripping those infected and their contacts of their clothes, and having them washed and shaved, as in Venice.

Mercifully, these measures never had to be put into practice, and, particularly once the immediate scare was over, pressure was on Robert Walpole to backtrack. Another physician, George Pye, rubbished Dr Mead and argued that "Deficient customs, loss of public and private credit, poverty, starving and destruction" could prove worse than the disease itself, and that guards and compulsory isolation were redolent of the "most inhuman restraints and confinements" of the past, and marks of an "arbitrary" power in France. Walpole's rivals persuaded him to greatly water down the measures in 1721.

Ring any bells, particularly across the Atlantic?

We have, thankfully, moved on, with modern medicine, a World Health Organisation, and a better governmental structure, but were we any more prepared than our forebears? It is worth looking at what has gone before, and remembering that those suffering previous epidemics were just as human as we are.

May we look forward to an ending such as Daniel Defoe describes in 'A Journal of the Plague Year' when "a secret surprize and smile of joy sat on every bodies face; they shook one another by the hands in the streets, who would hardly go on the same side of the way with one another before."

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Sources: C.W. Potter, A history of influenza, Journal of Applied Microbiology, 07 July 2008
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Paul Slack, The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England (1985)