Medical Discoveries in the 18th Century

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During the eighteenth century, many diseases plagued Colonial America. Although medical news was not the most prominent, it was by far the most essential in a time with diseases running rampant. This paper will look at the major diseases that affected America and the role that newspapers of the period played in keeping people informed of disease outbreaks; what people did not understand about illnesses or why they got sick; and how the diseases eventually got cured and the quackeries that came about in the process.

The most deadly diseases to affect people in the eighteenth century included smallpox, diphtheria, and yellow fever. The most feared disease of all was smallpox. It had already taken vast amounts of lives in Europe and was spreading rapidly throughout America. It began by claiming the lives of entire tribes of Native Americans then moving on to claim the lives of white settlers. The symptoms of smallpox began much like the flu with a sudden onset of fever, tiredness, back pain, and sometimes stomach pain and vomiting. During this period, the infected became highly contagious. Once the fever began to drop, a rash developed in nose and mouth. The rash then became bumps that spread all throughout the body.

Although diphtheria was not as feared as smallpox, it was an unknown disease that terrorized the New England colonies. Often referred to as “throat distemper” by colonials, large epidemics of this disease claimed many lives. Yellow fever was another disease that was known to cause the infected skin to turn yellow. “Aedes aegypti,” a specific breed of mosquito’s was responsible for the spread. By biting many different individuals it spread the disease from person to person, until it became a major epidemic. This disease was more common in the islands of the West Indies, Central America, and South America, but this was the first time that anything like this was present in colonial America.

Newspapers in the 18th century played a major role in informing the colonials about the medical diseases, and treatments. This valuable information helped to promote business for local printers because the colonials always wanted to stay informed of any recent breakthroughs or discoveries. In the time of the smallpox, yellow fever and diphtheria outbreaks, newspapers served the community by informing colonists of areas to avoid to decrease their chance of con-
traction. It also educated the colonists of symptoms to be aware of in case symptoms were present, they could receive treatment as soon as possible and others could avoid them. By serving the community with this information, it helped to prevent further unnecessary deaths.

Some examples from the newspapers from back in the eighteenth century are: The *South Carolina Gazette*, reported new outbreaks of the fatal small pox disease. In the February edition in 1760, the printer, Peter Timothy, offered his readers “a recipe against the plague.” “A concoction of “rub, sage, mint, rosemary, wormwood, and lavender,” combined in “white-wine vinegar.” The resulting elixir was guaranteed by four convicts going to the gallows to protect the user from smallpox.”

The *New England Weekly Journal*, provided colonists with what they thought would be a cure for diphtheria. Their method included,

“combining a mixture of “proven” medical practices of the day and folk herb remedies. The medical practice included raising “six blisters” on the patient, and the herb remedy involved the use of rhubarb and turpentine. In the event that neither the blisters nor the concoction prevented the throat of the patient from swelling, the patient would have to be bled and treated with “Oil of Cedar.”

In the eighteenth century, the colonists did not understand how or why they got sick. They were not aware of what germs were nor how to cure themselves of any sicknesses or diseases. Since so little was understood about what causes diseases, their medical remedies were often based on affecting bodily fluids. One method was to have the patient have their “bad” blood removed, thinking the body will then produce “good” blood and the patient would be cured. In the *Boston Evening-Post*, one essay described what the loss of too much bodily fluid would do to a person. The doctor warned,

“Too much spitting, disturbed digestion. He added, “There is certainly no humor in the body more healthy than the saliva.” Semen “discharged too lavishly,” caused weariness, convulsions, pains in the membranes of the brain, and foolishness, while “too great a discharge by urine occasions dryness, imperviousness and heat of the humors, enextinguishable thirst, crudities, lowness of the spirits, leanness, atrophy, and disorders
Colonists were also not aware of what immunity of the disease, small pox was. The disease had been around for centuries before they realized that small pox was contagious, but no one ever caught the disease twice. If someone lived through an attack, he would be safe from the disease for the rest of his life.  

One of the major breakthroughs of the eighteenth century was the inoculation of small pox. An English doctor, Edward Jenner, discovered the vaccination for small pox. He first discovered that inoculation was possible by performing the procedure on a cow. Then finally, he tried the vaccination process on a person by putting a little vaccine on a small spot on the arm or leg and then making several scratches with a needle to permit the vaccine to get in.  

Unfortunately, during the eighteenth century there was no found cure for diphtheria. Since diphtheria is such a deadly disease, an infected person has only hours to live before dying. Because of this factor, prevention is a must. In this time era, people tried many prevention methods, but were unable to completely wipe out the disease until the nineteenth century.  

The discovery of how yellow fever was wiped out came about by a medical officer named Major William C. Gorgas. He began in Cuba by draining the pools of the stagnant water which were the breeding places of mosquitoes. Because of his successes in Cuba, Gorgas was promoted in rank and helped many other countries, including America, to wipe out the breeding places of all infected mosquitoes.  

Living in a time period with such a low grade of technology there were many other medical problems that the colonists had to deal with. Because most of them were not knowledgeable about medicine or how to care for themselves in a healthy manner, many times they would usually believe any sort of concoction or remedy they would hear of or read about in the paper. One of the biggest quackeries of this time period was from an Irish philosopher named, George Berkeley. His method for treating many different aliments came from his “Treatis on Tar-Water.” Tar water, which consisted of water with tar or resin of pine trees, was used to treat,
“Ulceration of the Bowels,” “Distemper,” “as a Preservative or Preparative against the Small-pox,” and also provided individuals with “an Appetite.” Many people referred to tar water as a “miracle cure,” and used it on many other problems then just the aforementioned. Another false remedy of the time was “Chymical Compostion, called Chinese Stones.” “The description of the stones began with a certification that they would “effectually cure the Bites of all venomous or poisonous Creatures: as Rattle (and other) Snakes, Scorpions, mad Dogs, &c.” Not only did the stones cure snake bites, it also guaranteed to heal toothaches, sore eyes, swollen feet, sciatic pains, rheumatism, and cancer. With the modern technologies that exist today, it is clear to see that the guaranteed stones and the tar water remedies were nothing but a big myth and money maker.

Diseases of the eighteenth century were a major part of daily life. Newspapers helped in providing necessary information to society for news on subjects that truly mattered to them. A vast number of colonists died from many horrible diseases including small pox, yellow fever, and diphtheria, just to name a few, because only a minute about of people had medical knowledge. If not for newspapers, these numbers would have been drastically higher. Even though many of the newspapers provided many quackeries and false information to its readers, the information that it did provide gave hope to many infected citizens.


3 Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers*, 255.


6 Dietz, *All About Great Medical Discoveries*, 38.

7 Dietz, *All About Great Medical Discoveries*, 41-42.