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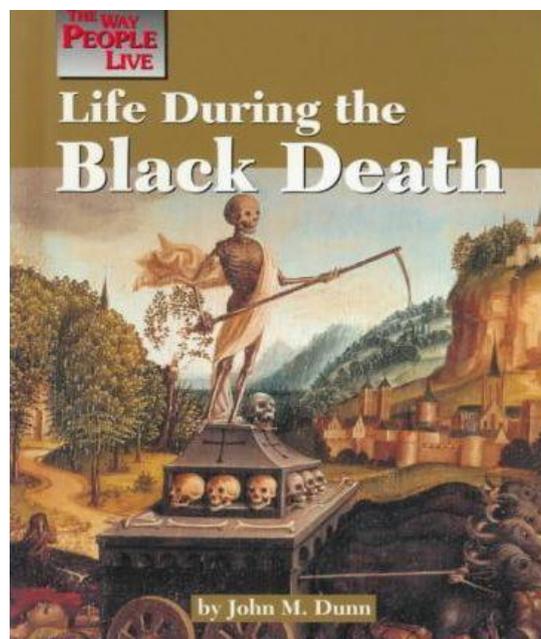
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Dunn, J. M. (2000). *Life during the Black Death*.. San Diego, California : Lucent.



## Help, Hope, and Healing

As the Black Death rapidly demolished vast populations of humanity, Europeans desperately sought help from the two institutions that traditionally provided them with hope and healing—the medical profession and the Catholic Church. Despite heroic attempts by many individual physicians and priests, neither institution had any success. Doctors were unable to heal victims or

prevent others from catching the Black Death. Baffled by the onslaught of the Great Mortality, church officials offered little but words of comfort to those who perished or watched their loved ones die.

Human ignorance was a major cause of these failings. Medieval medicine was steeped in tradition, superstition, and false information when the Black Death struck. The Catholic

*Medieval townspeople dance and pray to God to bring an end to the devastating plague.*



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Church was partly to blame, too; its restrictions on scientific research and the expression of new ideas stifled progress in efforts to understand human health. In 1300, for instance, the pope banned the practice of dissecting human cadavers, a decision that kept physicians ignorant about basic anatomy and the impact of disease on the human body.

They also tried a variety of other treatments. Many aggressively attacked the buboes, which they thought were the centers of the disease. One way to do this was to apply dried toads directly on top of the boils.

These shriveled creatures were expected to soak up plague poisons from the patients.

Some physicians burned the swellings with a hot iron. Others sliced them open with a thin sharp blade and released foul greenish pus and what they believed to be evil vapors. Next, they rubbed special poultices made from violets or various other ingredients directly into wounds to heal the damaged tissue. During this ordeal, patients tried to make themselves stronger and more resistant to the disease by drinking moderate amounts of fruit juices.

Bleeding was also used. This was done by cutting open a vein in the arm and letting the blood drip into an open container. The veins that were bled during this procedure were believed to have astrological connections with heavenly bodies. The correct amount of bloodletting supposedly balanced the humors in one's body and helped ward off pestilence. Another method was cupping—an operation done with a heated glass vessel to draw blood to the surface of the skin.

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Not all treatments were invasive. Many doctors also made use of herbal ointments and salves as curative medicines. Some were pleasant, soothing potions consisting of apple, syrup, rosewater, peppermint, and lemon. Others were exotic concoctions that often contained ingredients such as powdered stag's horn, snake meat, powdered emeralds, liquid gold, and various toxic substances.

All too soon, doctors and physicians discovered that none of these treatments worked. Few of their efforts to prevent the spread of the disease worked either—though not for lack of trying.

## Prevention

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Doctors and priests alike advised patients and parishioners to seek protection from God. Medieval doctors routinely asked patients if they had confessed their sins and received communion—acts that could win them salvation. In the case of the Black Death, doctors also recommended the wearing of charms as

preventatives. Across Europe many Christians wore small crosses about their necks, while their Muslim counterparts in the Mideast, North Africa, and elsewhere carried replicas of gold lions.

Prayer was held out as the surest method of prevention. Among the more popular prayers is this one, which mixes Christian beliefs and astrology to persuade heaven to cancel the evil influence of plague-causing stars:

Star of Heaven, who nourished the Lord and rooted up the plague of death which our first parents planted; may that star now deign to counter the constellations whose strife brings the people the ulcers of a terrible death. O glorious star of the sea, save us from the plague. Hear us: for your Son who honours you denies you nothing. Jesus, save us, for whom the Virgin Mary prays to you.<sup>93</sup>

In addition to prayer, purification of the air was recommended as a preventative measure. Many people believed that stagnant air con-

tained infections. The solution was to stir up the air to keep it clean. Cannon explosions, gunfire, and pealing church bells rang out from sunrise to sunset in many towns and villages across Europe as frightened men and women tried to stimulate the flow of air in their communities. According to Johannes Nohl,

Many people had little birds flying about in their rooms so that they might absorb the poison and keep the air in motion. It was also believed that spiders, particularly the larger and speckled species, absorbed all poisons in the houses, thus preserving the inhabitants from infection.<sup>94</sup>

Many people also placed bowls of milk and pieces of freshly baked bread impaled on wooden sticks inside their homes to absorb any plague poisons that drifted inside.

*A plague doctor, in clothing worn to protect him from disease.*



The burning of fires offered another means of purifying the air of bad agents. As an extra precaution, many people burned sweet smelling woods such as juniper, ash, oak, and pine in their cook fires. At Avignon, France, Pope Clement VI, under orders from his doctor, spent his days and nights sitting between two fireplaces as the Black Death raged through the city. Whether owing to his isolation or to the fires that may have destroyed any fleas in the room, the pope successfully avoided getting the plague.

Since many medical authorities argued that sweet, fragrant smells created beneficial agents that counteracted the disease, those living in dread of the plague often kept fragrant flowers nearby. Women were considered by their doctors to be especially at risk and often clutched a small flower bouquet to their noses whenever they left their homes.

Some people wore masks to avoid breathing foul air. In Rome, plague physicians became known as “beak doctors” because of the oversized birdlike masks they wore to protect themselves from their dying patients.

Physicians also advised staying indoors at night and darkening any well-lit windows to ward off approaching foul air. Rest was thought to be a good idea, but people were urged not to get too much sleep, especially in the daytime. Nor should they sleep on their backs, for such a position only made entrance of foul air into the nostrils and lungs all that much easier. Instead, doctors advised people to lie on one side and move often in bed during the night.

Dionysius Colle, a fourteenth-century physician, urged people to also avoid foul-smelling places such as latrines and charnel houses—places where bodies or bones were deposited.

But other doctors disagreed. Arguing that “bad” would drive out “bad,” they advised

their patients to bathe in small amounts of urine and to breathe the stench of latrines as a means of fumigating against the Black Death. Some even recommended bathing in and drinking goat urine. In the Crimea region along the Black Sea, people threw dead dogs into the streets to stink out the agents of pestilence. Others kept stinking billy goats in their houses.

## **Changing Personal Habits**

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Most doctors were far more apt to recommend cleanliness, a proper diet, and clean living as the best way to avoid the plague. However, their views differed widely on how best to do this. Some recommended, for ex-

ample, the washing of hands and feet, but not entire bodies. By washing the entire body, they said, patients would cause skin pores to widen and be more receptive to corrupted air.

Active people were thought to be at greater risk than inactive people. Fatigue was to be avoided at all costs. Passionate and highly emotional people, athletes, and anyone who led vigorous physical lives were strongly admonished to reduce their level of activity. Instead, they were urged to move slowly and avoid exercise, especially if they felt illness coming upon them.

Proper diet was also considered an important preventative measure. Only light meals were recommended, and they were to be chewed carefully and thoroughly. Foods that spoiled quickly, such as meat and dairy products, were to be shunned. According to a report from the University of Paris medical faculty in 1348, "No poultry should be eaten, no waterfowl, no suckling pig, no old beef, altogether no fat meat. . . . Olive oil with food is mortal [deadly]."<sup>95</sup> Medical experts also frowned on eating desserts. John of Burgundy, an English medical practitioner in 1365, offered these comprehensive, preventative measures:

First you should avoid over-indulgence in food and drink, and also avoid baths and everything which might rarefy the body and open the pores, for the pores are the doorways through which poisonous air can enter, piercing the heart and corrupting the life force. Above all sexual intercourse should be avoided. You should eat little or no fruit, unless it is sour, and should consume easily-digested food and spice wine diluted with water. Avoid mead and everything else made with honey, and season food with strong vinegar.<sup>96</sup>



*In an attempt to escape the disease, townspeople fled to the country.*

On the other hand, doctors recommended beneficial antiplague meals that consisted of bread, eggs, nuts, and fruit consumed in small amounts. Wine and water were the best drinks to have with meals.

Special herbal remedies were also popular in the fourteenth century. Apothecaries—specialists in herbal remedies—dug through their stores of plants to find those that might stave off infection. Forerunners of the modern pharmacists, these herbalists used their knowledge of plants to provide a variety of medicines, both curatives and preventatives.

They recommended that anyone wishing to escape the Black Death should cultivate a small garden of myrrh, saffron, pepper, onion, garlic, and leeks—spices and herbs believed to ward off disease if consumed. They also urged the eating of figs, the woody herb rue, and filbert nuts.

The right frame of mind was also considered to be an important way of warding off the Black Death. Inhabitants of many medieval societies wracked by the plague were encouraged to keep up their spirits and have a positive outlook on life. They were told to avoid morbid thoughts despite the death and dying taking place around them. A mind that dwelled on death only invited death; one that focused on pleasant things brought on good

health. As two Italian physicians, known as Marsilio and Garbo, pointed out:

No man should think of death. . . . Nothing should distress him, but all his thoughts should be directed to pleasing, agreeable and delicious things. . . . Beautiful landscapes, fine gardens should be visited. . . . Listening to beautiful, melodious songs is wholesome, as is also to enjoy the joys of the fine season in the company of agreeable people. The contemplation of gold and silver and other precious stones is comforting to the heart.<sup>97</sup>

## Acts of Piety

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Many Christians also performed other acts of piety. They hoped these deeds would appease

God's wrath and make the plague disappear. Under the leadership of church officials, they erected new churches, pillars, statues, and altars to honor God, Jesus, and the Virgin Mary. They also honored many saints, including St. Sebastian, Rose of Viterbo, Domencia de Paradisco, and St. Rock of Montpellier, and cried out to them for protection from the ravages of the Black Death.

Many groups of terrified Christians made pilgrimages to places such as Messina, Italy, just to be near the shrines or graves of certain saints. Pilgrims often dug up the remains of saints because they believed that relics such as a skull or a piece of bone offered them spiritual protection from the plague. These bone fragments were so highly sought after that they became commodities on the black market. Many rich Europeans tried to buy as many relics as they could to guarantee their safety.

In Vienna, one group of Christians attended religious services and passed among themselves silver arrows that had touched another arrow believed to have killed St. Sebastian. According to Nohl, they also took communion by drinking sacramental wine "which had previously passed through the skull of the . . . [saint] . . . and a particle of the bone of the arm was offered to be kissed. All this as a preservative against infection."<sup>102</sup>

Along with pilgrimages, Christians also obeyed the pope's command to fill the streets with devout processions to openly demonstrate their piety and boost the spirits of

Christians as the Black Death rampaged across Europe. Many Christians believed that they could move closer to God and boost their spirituality by appearing to be humble and poor. Barefooted, dressed in sack cloths, and covered with ashes, they paraded through town streets, ripped at their hair and clothes, and prayed to God to save them from the plague.

These demonstrators generated a great deal of attention throughout Europe. In time, however, they were overshadowed by an even larger mass movement that had neither the urging nor the blessing of the pope.

## The Flagellants

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This movement consisted of people who were often called cross brethren or cross brothers. Most Europeans knew them as flagellants. For the most part, they were religious zealots who belonged to a massive crusade that first arose to prominence in Germany. They then swept into France and the Low Countries (what is now Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) and later, during the period of the Black Death, moved into eastern Europe. Representing all social classes of medieval society, flagellants believed they could stop the Black Death by performing public acts of penance for their sins. Some flagellants interpreted the Black Death as a portent of coming supernatural events. Brothers of the Cross in Germany, for example, believed a long dead hero, Emperor Frederick Barbarosa, would come back to life and save them from the Black Death. Others thought Jesus Christ would soon appear.

Often numbering more than forty thousand, the flagellants walked from town to town like a huge army. Dressed in black robes with cowed hoods and a felt hat that covered

their eyes, they carried wooden crosses and chanted religious hymns. At night, they bore torches and candles as they moved across the cobblestoned streets. Striding in pairs, their eyes fixed on the earth, the flagellants solemnly marched in a serpentlike parade through the streets and recited these words:

Whoe'er to save his soul is fain,  
Must pay and render back again.  
His safety so shall he consult;  
Help us, good Lord, to this result.<sup>103</sup>

They halted only when they reached the town square or wherever the main church was located. Inside the church, they stripped to their underclothes and returned to the churchyard with whips called *flagella*. Each whip consisted of a stick with three knotted leather thongs pierced by small iron nails. Under the guidance of an experienced leader, the men

forgiveness for their personal sins. Then they made different shapes with their body, each one symbolizing a particular sin. Lying on one side with three fingers stretched out past the head meant the person atoned for the sin of perjury. An adulterer lay on his stomach; a murderer positioned himself on his back.

Life among the flagellants was hard. They engaged in ritual self-punishment three times a day—twice in public, once in private—in an attempt to appease God and bring about an end to the Black Death. They slept on straw under a small blanket. Men seldom washed or shaved their beards. Their food was simple. Mingling with women was forbidden. Accepting charity during their pilgrimage was forbidden.

flogged themselves across their naked backs with the whips until blood dripped down their legs. A chronicler in Gottingen, Germany, observed, "I have seen when they whipped themselves, how sometimes those bits of metal penetrated the flesh so deeply that it took more than two attempts to pull them out."<sup>104</sup>

As the flagellants lashed themselves, they sang religious songs and chanted verses like these:

Come here for penance good and well,  
Thus we escape from burning hell.  
Lucifer's a wicked wight,  
His prey he sets with pitch alight. . . .  
Jesus was refreshed with gall  
We, therefore, on our cross now fall.<sup>105</sup>

At this point, they fell one at a time on the ground and with outstretched arms and legs made the shape of a cross and cried out for

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Huge crowds greeted them wherever they appeared and generally received them with great respect. Many people came to watch the flogging and the public display of piety because they considered the flagellants true holy men who had the power to thwart the mortality of the plague. Other spectators, however, were bemused by the thousands of scantily dressed men wounding themselves with barbs and singing hymns. To them, the spectacle of public penance was merely a temporary distraction from the everyday terror of the Black Death.

Flagellants, however, were deadly serious. And as the plague grew worse, the more fanatical among their ranks turned increasingly violent. Upon their arrival at many



towns, extremists incited anti-Jewish hysteria and led murderous attacks on local Jews.

Government and church officials reacted with alarm as the actions of the flagellants became bolder and more menacing. Finally, in 1349, the church clamped down on the flagellants. Fearing they had usurped the Catholic Church's authority to lead religious observance, Pope Clement VI publicly condemned all flagellants. He threatened them with excommunication if they did not disband. At the same time, various European kings, nobles, and government leaders also cracked down on the cross brethren by sending in troops to disperse them. Under such pressure, the movement faded away within a year of the pope's proclamation.

## A Tragic Legacy

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But the flagellants left behind a tragic legacy. Because of their unsanitary, bloody practices; their ability to draw large crowds of spectators; and their movement of great numbers of people from one place to the next, they helped to spread the very disease that they had hoped to end.

The failure of the flagellant movement only added to the terrifying and inescapable conclusion that human beings had not a single means of protection from the monster known as the Black Death. It would run its course unimpeded. But what would the earth be like when the pestilence finished inflicting its horror?