

Medicine in the Baroque Period

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The Baroque era (circa 1685-1750) was a time when there were devastating waves of The Pest (plague), The Great Pox (syphilis), typhus and a host of other infectious and non-infectious conditions. Against this backdrop, some of the finest writers, thinkers, artists and musicians were artistically prolific despite, often leading short lives. Great musicians such as Vivaldi, Albinoni, Handel, and Bach lived through this creative and exciting period.

ParkViews this month formed part of the St Francis Baroque Music Festival, and so the talk took place on a Saturday morning, and not on the usual Thursday night. The speaker was Adriano Duse, Professor and Head of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases in the School of Pathology, University of the Witwatersrand. On a number of occasions he has been deployed by the WHO as a consultant during outbreaks of viral and infectious diseases in many parts in Africa

The talk focused in particular on the bubonic plague, a disease that is still with us – as seen in the recent outbreak in Madagascar. Over the centuries there have been a number of pandemics. One happened in the 6th century and was known as the Justinian Plague, after the Roman emperor. Another began in the 14th century, and some estimates suggest that this killed half the population of Europe.

Plague is a bacterial disease often transmitted by fleas coming from infected rodents. Its symptoms include fever, delirium and enlarged lymph nodes, called bubos. Plague can also affect the brain or the lungs. Sufferers from the plague were often shunned or abandoned.

The pandemic was the cause of religious doubt and dissension. There was a widespread notion that the plague was a form of divine retribution, and prayers, fasting and flagellation were all tried. It was also thought by many that the plague was caused by minority groups such as Jews and Moslems.

Capuchin monks believed that sufferers of the plague should be given treatment even if this put themselves at risk of catching the disease: there was a high mortality rate among Capuchins. Jesuits, by contrast, regarded the treating of plague victims as a mortal sin, because it was a form of suicide.

Medical treatments of the time, including herbal applications, could offer no cure and as a result doctors lost credibility. But the plague also brought challenges to existing ideas about medicine. Emphasis shifted from the individual human body and the balance of 'Humours', or vital fluids, within that body (a notion that goes back to Classical Greece) to ideas about contagions from outside the individual.

This is something that gained expression in Venice where ships had to wait 40 days before docking, to ensure that no-one on board had died from the plague in that period. The word 'quarantine' is derived from the Italian 'quaranta giorni' which means 40 days, designed to echo the time Jesus spent in the wilderness.

Included in the rich heritage of the arts of the Baroque period there are, inevitably, some striking accounts of the plague. One such is Pieter Breughel's painting 'The Triumph of Death'. And Daniel Defoe, author of *Robinson Crusoe*, has provided a fictional reconstruction in *A Journal of the Plague Year*.

Mike Williams