

PUBLIC HEALTH THROUGH TIME

- Maz Public Health: go on – what’s your theory?
- Chaz All public health until 1900 was a mistake!
- Maz Oh my goodness -- where did you get that from!!!!
- Chaz No – I’m right – you’ll see.
- Maz OK, explain; what about prehistoric public health.
- Chaz Well, of course, prehistoric tribes were nomadic, so they didn’t construct any public health provision.
- Maz and they had no concept of any link between dirt and disease ... all disease was caused by the spirits.
- Chaz Even in Egyptian and Greek times, you know, I don’t think there was any public health as such.
- Maz Really? The Egyptians had toilets and mosquito nets, and their priests kept clean for religious reasons, and the Greek had their Programme for Health and moderation in all things and showers ... and health resorts – the *asklepeia* ...
- Chaz Yes, but ‘Public health’ are works undertaken by the government, and this was all personal provision.
- Maz So the first real public health system was Rome?
- Chaz The first substantial public health system.
- Maz And it WAS substantial.
- Chaz And how!!! Rome had 9 aqueducts bringing 222 million gallons of water a day. 9 public baths ‘covered with ... glass... marble... and silver’. 7 huge sewers (the Cloaca Maxima was big enough for a wagon). Public latrines seating up to 60 people. And the first-ever hospitals, and commissioners to monitor the water, and 300 slaves to clean the streets at night. Way, way ahead of their time.
- Maz And then everything stopped during the Middle Ages?
- Chaz Oooo – you’ve got to be careful. It couldn’t be on the same scale as Roman Public Health because medieval states weren’t as big as the Roman Empire, but it’s a myth that the Middle Ages were mindlessly filthy.
- Maz Really? Have you any evidence for this? There’s loads of evidence that medieval towns were dirty.
- Chaz There’s a *huge* amount of evidence for Medieval Public Health. Many of our hospitals were built during the Middle Ages, you know (Bart’s Hospital in London, for example). Monasteries had ‘lavers’, and flush garderobes, and running sewers, and compulsory baths...
- Maz Four times a year.
- Chaz I know – ‘whether they needed it or not’. But Paris had 26 bathhouses in 1292. You find that most of your evidence about how dirty medieval towns were, comes from the laws they passed in fact to keep the place clean. Venice quarantined infected ships, and Southampton built the most amazing aqueduct...
- Maz OK! OK! Point proven – the Middle Ages had public health. What about the Renaissance?
- Chaz Same kind of thing, really – there *is* evidence that Early Modern towns were dirty – Erasmus’s letter describing a peasant’s house, for instance, with its rush floors full of ‘spittle and vomit and urine’. But at the same time, you only have to look at the measures taken in London during the Plague of 1665 – the Bills of Mortality, and the examiners and rakers, and the plague pits and Pest houses – to see that Early Modern towns had thorough systems of public health ... *within the financial and medical limitations of the period.*
- Maz So why was the 19th century so filthy?
- Chaz Population growth, I think. The systems that worked for small towns just got overwhelmed when you were talking about a metropolis of 2.3 million, which was the population of London in 1850.

Maz So public health *had* to improve
Chaz And did so...
Maz Edwin Chadwick and the Public Health Act of 1848!
Chaz ... AND compulsory smallpox Vaccination in 1853, and Florence Nightingale and hospital hygiene, and the Public Health Act of 1875, which enforced slum clearance, sewers and clean water, and the removal of nuisances.
Maz So why do you say all public health before 1900 was a mistake?
Chaz What did Frontinus say about the aqueducts?
Maz Go on...
Chaz Frontinus praised the aqueducts because, he said, they ‘removed the causes of the *unhealthy air*’. He thought disease was caused by BAD AIR!!! And that was why kings ordered the streets to be cleaned in the Middle Ages. And even Chadwick ordered his public health measures to get rid of the ‘miasmas’ he thought were making people ill.
Maz So you’re saying that the whole public health thing was based on a misconception until the Germ Theory!
Chaz A lucky mistake!
Maz What an amazing idea! But after 1900, they were able to build public health systems knowing what they were doing?
Chaz More than that. Public Health before 1900 was based on the so-called ‘preventative principle’ – the idea that it was the government’s job to remove the nuisances which made people poorly. *After* 1900, it was based more on what was called the ‘personal principle’ – the idea of positive measures to try to make people positively healthy. So you get the Liberal government of the 1900s bringing in things like free school meals and ‘nitty nurses’, and free medical treatment for workers...
Maz ... the idea that governments should care for people ‘from the cradle to the grave’.
Chaz Well yes – and that, of course, was the principle which underlay the Welfare State.
Maz Lord Beveridge and his ‘five giants’ – social security to defeat poverty, the National Health Service to combat disease, free education to end ignorance, council housing to end squalor, and ... er ... don’t tell me ... that’s it: full employment to end idleness.
Chaz And all brought in in the three years after World War Two.
Maz That IS truly AMAZING. I’m glad I’m alive now and not in past times!!!