Medical History In The Elizabethan Era

Medicine in the Elizabethan era had many parts to it. During the Elizabethan era many people's knowledge of medicine was wrong causing it to slowly, if not barely, advance. There was a wide range of beliefs, from treatments to diseases. Three main things that were part of the medical history in the Elizabethan Era were humorism, medical help and treatments, and the black plague.

Humorism was the belief that a person's mood and health were directly related by the amount of four specific bodily fluids. The four fluids, which were believed to have their own humor, were black bile, phlegm, yellow bile, and blood (Benson and Stock; "Medicine"). It was believed "that these flour fluids could explain differences in age, gender, emotion, and personality" ("Medicine"). They were also associated with human characteristics, and were believed to balance the body out (Benson and Stock). Each humor was influenced by emotional factors as well as external factors like season changes, time of day, and the weather. Each humor was connected to a specific organ, and any imbalance of the humors could cause damage to these organs. If an organ was damaged, people believed it was because of the imbalance of the humor that was connected to it. ("Medicine"). Each humor was believed to be caused by different emotions and affect different parts of the body.

Two of the four types of bodily fluids are black bile and phlegm. Black bile was known to be "melancholic" (Benson and Stock). Too much black bile was often associated with depression and not being happy. The presence of black bile was thought to be an issue with the spleen. ("Medicine"). Phlegm was known to be for a person with an unemotional and calm disposition or in other words, phlegmatic (Benson and Stock). The presence of phlegm was associated with a problem with the brain because of how the person lacked significant emotion in themselves ("Medicine"). Black bile and phlegm signified aging ("Medicine"). These two bodily fluids were known to be the ones more typically associated with feeling little emotion or happiness, the opposite of the next two fluids.

The next two bodily fluids are yellow bile and blood. Yellow bile was known to be "choleric" or bad-tempered and irritable (Benson and Stock). Physicians believed that too much yellow bile could make a person aggressive or angry ("Medicine"). It indicated problems with the Gallbladder ("Medicine"). Blood was known to be for an optimistic or "sanguine" person (Benson and Stock). It was always related directly to the heart. Blood and yellow bile signified youthfulness. The two fluids were associated with two strong, expressive emotions. ("Medicine"). Humorism played a part in the kinds of treatment and medicine that were provided for a person seeking medical attention.

Medical help and treatments were based on the person's wealth and type of illness. Medical help was different based on where a person was on the social ladder in Elizabethan England (Benson and Stock). People with money who could afford a doctor visited educated physicians who were trained in surgery and medicine. The cost of the appointment was expensive, therefore the patients of a physician were usually the richest members of society. ("Medicine") Surgeons were the next best thing after since they were also educated and could perform services such as amputations (Benson and Stock; Dawson 30). After them came barbers, who

were medical professionals at the time. (Benson and Stock; “Medicine”) They usually performed bloodletting and teeth pulling (“Medicine”). The majority of the Elizabethan population visited the apothecary. The poorest members of society turned to the knowledge of people they knew when an illness occurred. They would consult the town’s “wise woman” for treatment suggestions. (Dawson 32). Different medicines and remedies were prescribed based on the person giving them and the type of illness.

There were many types of remedies and treatment offered during the Elizabethan era, especially since almost everything was based on the humoral theory. “Humoral theory called for a range of medicines and treatments to help people with unbalanced humors” (“Medicine”). Depending on what humor was out of balance, a physician would prescribe bloodletting, a treatment where the doctor would remove blood from the body by opening a vein (“Medicine”, Dawson 33). They would then “cup” it and suction it an area of the body to increase blood supply (“Medicine”). Another treatment offered was emetic, a treatment in which people ate a substance that made them vomit which was believed to take the poison out of somebody (Benson and Stock; “Medicine”). Hot iron therapy was a treatment in which the physician used a hot iron to heat and dry up an area that was affected by coldness and moisture (Dawson 33; “Medicine”). These treatments were all popular but none as much as herbs were.

Herbs-based medicines were used in a more general way than one particular humor. They were easier to use than many other treatments and more affordable (Dawson 35). Many people often mixed their own herbal medicines at their homes (Benson and Stock). If a person complained of pain in their head, they were usually given sweet herbs (“Medicine”). Some sweet herbs are rose, lavender, sage and bay (Dawson 35). If someone complained of their stomach, they were usually given wormwood, mint, and balm. A person complaining of breathing problems was administered licorice and comfrey. (“Medicine”). Many different treatments were used for all kinds of pains and illnesses.

There were many things that the Black Plague was caused by, and many things that people believed caused it. Realistically speaking, “the plague was spread to humans from fleas that lived on the rats scuttling amidst the dirt of London’s streets”(Dawson 49). It was also spread when people were trying to escape it and would travel to other villages and spread it there (Dawson 50). Many people during the plague recorded the deaths and from these recordings it is proven that the most deaths from the plagues were in the places that were the dirtiest, poorest, and had the worst living conditions (Kallen 67). Most people did not know the reasons that caused the plague, so many believed that it was caused by the movements of the planets or that it was a punishment from god (Kallen 69). The cause for the plague was not known by many but it caused fear in the heart of many people in Elizabethan England, making them search for a way to treat it.

There were many treatments attempted for the plague, but there was never a cure (Dawson 52). One of the first people who tried their own remedy for the plague was Dr. George Thomson who caught the plague and claimed he survived by putting a dry toad on his chest (Kellan 72). After this the mayor of London started isolation hospitals where people with symptoms of the plague would be held for 40-60 days and people with the plague would be quarantined there (Dawson 53). The only problem with these isolation hospitals was that there was not enough space for all of the people getting the plague (Dawson 52). The way that London combatted this was by marking the doors of the sick with a big red cross showing people not to go inside (Kellan 71). Another way that people tried to get rid of the plague was by lighting fires in the streets to

cleanse the air of disease (Kellan 72). Eventually people made the realization that the disease was transferred through touch (Dawson 54). When people realized this then they banned large assembly of crowds and ale-houses and coffe-houses were closed down (Dawson 55).

Humorism, medical help and treatments, and the Black Plague are the three main parts of medical history in the Elizabethan era. Humorism was about how the amount of black bile, phlegm, yellow bile, and blood in one's body could affect mood and health. Medical help and treatments was about what a person can afford and the treatments for a patient depending on which humor was out of balance and whether they were wealthy or not. Lastly, the plague was a disease that started being spread in 1347 and was caused by fleas that were carried by rats. The Black Plague also had many thought treatments and many treatments that were proven to be effective like quarantining people inside or in hospitals. By researching medicine and sanitation in the Elizabethan era one can realize how similar and how different diseases and methods for treating them were.