AWESOME stories

Garb of 17th-Century Plague-Treating Doctor

During the Middle Ages, doctors were as baffled about "The Plague" as the people whom they tried to treat.

By the 17th Century - when another outbreak of "The Pestilence" occurred - doctors were still without the skills needed to effectively treat the illness which could quickly cause a pandemic.

When people have a very contagious disease, how do doctors keep from getting sick, too? If the disease seems to be spreading faster than anyone can even imagine, why would doctors want to risk getting sick? If all the doctors are sick, how would anyone get treated?

In the seventeenth century, some doctors appear to have worn protective clothing like the garments depicted in this engraving.

Paul Fürst (1608 - 1666) published this image. He may also have been its engraver. It is included in a German-language book, published in 1921, featuring caricatures and satire from the practice of medicine, entitled *Die Karikatur und Satire in der Medizin: Mediko-kunsthistorische Studie*.

What, exactly, are we seeing in this picture? The caption tells us that the physician is "Doctor Schnabel" [in English, "Dr. Beak"], a doctor treating plague victims in Rome.

In 1672, a physician named Dr. Hodges wrote a poem about this rather strange-looking garb. That poem is included in *Wine: A Scientific Exploration* (at page 42):

> *As may be seen on picture here,*
> *In Rome the doctors do appear,*
> *When to their patients they are called,*
> *In places by the plague appalled,*
> *Their hats and cloaks, of fashion new,*
> *Are made of oilcloth, dark of hue,*
> *Their caps with glasses are designed,*
> *Their bills with antidotes all lined,*
> *That foulsome air may do no harm,*
> *Nor cause the doctor man alarm,*
> *The staff in hand must serve to show*
> *Their noble trade where'er they go.*
>
> (*Wine: A Scientific Exploration*, edited by Merton Sandler and Roger Pinder, at page 42.)

Commenting on the horrific nature of the plague in London, just before the Great Fire of 1666, Dr. Nathaniel Hodges (the poet) tells us how quickly the illness spread from family to family:

> *The disease, like the Hydras heads, was no sooner extinguished in one family, but it broke out in many more. In little time we found our task too great, and despaired of putting an entire STOP to the infection.*

So ... how did Dr. Hodges protect himself?

> *Rising early in the morning, Hodges placed a nutmeg in his mouth as a precaution, and in the course of two or three hours saw all of the patients who crowded into the waiting room of his house. He paused for breakfast and then went out to see the housebound.*
>
> *To ward off the infection, he brought along chafing dishes with coals. He ignited them and placed them at the entryway, before the windows, and under the beds if there was enough space. Quicklime, thrown onto the coals along with various spices and herbs, produced a penetrating steam "to destroy the efficacy of the pestilential miasmata."*

As the long day of seeing plague patients wore on, what did he do to keep his resistance high?

> *On his rounds, Hodges held lozenges in his mouth and took care not to go into sickrooms when he was sweating or short of breath, thinking his resistance might be low. By midday he needed to fortify himself before seeing any more infected patients, and he returned home for a glass of sack "to warm the stomach, refresh the spirits, and dissipate any beginning Lodgment of the Infection." Then he partook of a generous amount of boiled meat with pickles, which he felt helped prevent the distemper, before resuming work. "I had always many persons come for advice," he recalled. "As soon as I could dispatch them I again visited* [patients] *until 8 or 9 at night."*

Not all physicians and druggists were as dedicated as Dr. Hodges. Most had fled from London to other, presumably safer places:

> *With four-fifths of the College of Physicians and an unknown number of apothecaries and surgeons in flight from the capital, perhaps between 250 and 300 doctors, apothecaries, and surgeons remained out of a normal cohort of some 500 to 600 licensed and unlicensed practitioners claiming professional skills.*

Of the medical providers who stayed to help, many paid the ultimate price when they also died:

> *John Allin's estimate of 140 fatalities when the epidemic was at its peak suggests that 50 percent of those who stayed may have fallen in private or public practice - 25 percent of the total cohort of licensed and unlicensed practitioners serving London in normal times.* (Quotes, here and above, from *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year*, by A. Lloyd Moote, Dorothy C. Moote, pages 141-144.)

It wasn't until the Great Fire of London, in 1666, that the plague epidemic ceased. The fire put an end to the rats and fleas which were spreading the plague.

Click on the image for a much-better view.

Credits:

Image depicting copper engraving of *Doctor Schnabel* [i.e, "Dr. Beak"], a plague physician in seventeenth-century Rome, circa 1656.

Included in *Die Karikatur und Satire in der Medizin: Medico-Kunsthistorische Studie von Professor Dr. Eugen Holländer* ("Caricature and Satire in Medicine: Medical-Art History Study by Professor Dr. Eugene Holländer"), 2nd edition (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1921), figure 79 (at page 171). Online, courtesy archive.org.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Garb-of-17th-Century-Plague-Treating-Doctor0

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Garb-of-17th-Century-Plague-Treating-Doctor0

Media Stream

Garb of 17th-Century Plague-Treating Doctor

View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Garb-of-17th-Century-Plague-Treating-Doctor1