

ABC

There was a change to the advertised programme for the April members' meeting when Joan Grundy agreed to step in to cover for illness. She had gathered together a random selection - an ABC of illnesses, diseases and treatments, taken from her book, which have affected all families throughout history. It describes causes, effects and sufferings endured by our ancestors. Family historians say they like to put flesh on the bones. Tonight in some cases, Joan said she would be showing and describing what is underneath the flesh so she hoped members had not had a huge tea! Joan decided she wanted to include some pictures in her book and diagrams of diseases listed but her enthusiasm was curbed somewhat when she showed them to friends and relatives and their reaction was an emphatic - no. However Joan had a captive audience and would be showing pictures that did not make it into the finished book. Some were drawings made from original photographs. For Doctors, photography, sketching and recording details of cases and comparing with colleagues' cases, was a major way of identifying disease. There was little understanding of the causes of disease and therefore few treatments to offer. There were no vaccinations until the late 19c. Antibiotics and anaesthetics were a 20c discovery. Surgical operations had been performed for many centuries but until the discovery of reliable anaesthetics in the 1840s and antibiotics in 1911 many died from the shock of the procedure or infection afterwards.

Joan started off with **A**nthrax, caused by bacteria found in sheep and cattle. It can be caught by anyone handling the fleece or hide of an infected animal. The spores can stay alive for years in dried fleeces and skins, and are not destroyed by boiling or freezing. Spores can enter the skin through a tiny graze. In a few days a red gangrenous swelling appears and a strong unpleasant smell. The victim becomes very ill and has a high fever. This is external anthrax. Internal anthrax is caused by inhaling dust laden with spores from the fleeces and a type of pneumonia occurs with bleeding in the lungs. In 1880 there was an outbreak among the wool sorters in Bradford. Some cases were caused by shaving brushes in which anthrax spores had lain dormant.

Next came the blood sucking **B**ed bug which does not actually live in beds but in cracks in the walls and floors during the day and feeds on it's victims at night. The area affected becomes very inflamed and itchy and lasts several days. Scratching causes infection and fatalities in very young children. They were very common in overcrowded houses with earth floors or back to back terraces but can also be found in clean houses, brought in boxes, packaging - or through open windows. It is claimed bugs will leave an empty house along gutters or pipes to one that is occupied and will travel 50 yards from home to get a meal and will then go back again, so there is no escape. They can survive up to a year without food. They are still around today.



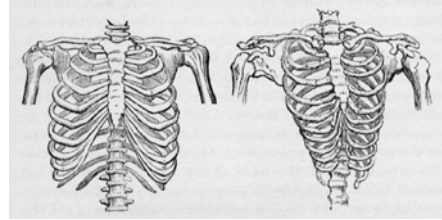
Joan half covered the next imagine of a man so members who didn't want to see any more could close their eyes. He had a tumour (**C**ancer) in his abdomen and over a period of two years it increased so much in size, sideways and upwards that in 1864 he went to see a doctor. This man suffered from constipation and vomiting but had no pain. As there was no effective treatment to offer all they did was observe his progress. After he died a post mortem was held - I will not go into detail.

Diphtheria - mainly a childhood disease caused by bacteria. Severity varies greatly - mild, to a fatal disease spread by coughing or sneezing or sucking the end of a pencil which had been in the mouth of an infected person. The throat becomes very inflamed and very painful. A tough, dense white membrane spreads across the back of the throat and causes death by suffocation. In the absence of antibiotics, the doctor would plunge his fingers down the throat to tear away the membrane so the child could breathe. Babies today are routinely vaccinated against diphtheria.

Erysipelas - a highly infectious disease caused by infection through the skin. It was once a very common disease in hospitals, particularly surgical or maternity wards where it would spread rapidly from patient to patient with disastrous results. Symptoms appeared suddenly - a very high fever, headache, vomiting and delirium. The area of infection was bright red, smooth, shiny and swollen, painful and full of tiny pustules which turned into blisters. The most common site was the face and it could cause one or both eyes to close, and difficulty in breathing. The red area changed colour to purple, brown then yellow. Skin peeled off

and if a large area was affected or turned black it was a very grave sign. The patient usually died within 7-8 days. If a patient survived, repeated attacks were possible as the disease lay dormant until affected by another illness. Diabetics, pregnant women and people with kidney disease were susceptible.

Fainting – We are all familiar with historical novels where the heroine made a habit of swooning or fainting. We have all seen paintings of ladies with miniscule waists achieved with tightly laced corsets. They may have looked enchanting but they did untold damage. Joan showed a picture of a normal chest cavity with a rib cage extending right down to just above the waist and another looking like a funnel after years of tight lacing. Inside the ribcage the lungs are squashed and pushed upwards making it difficult to breathe, depriving the body of oxygen – the reason ladies fainted. Doctors hated corsets.



Gout - until mid 19c this disease was a mystery. No-one knew what caused it. It is caused by an imbalance of uric acid being retained in the blood stream and then deposited in the joints. This causes pain in all the joints but especially the big toe. In 1781 it was thought that idleness and intemperance were the principal causes of gout. Port, sherry, Madeira and strong wines were also blamed and this was partly true.

Honey sickness was in fact impetigo – also called scum pox as it was caught by rugby players and footballers. It was once a common skin infection caused by staphylococcus and streptococcus bacteria which today causes the infection MRSA. The cause of impetigo was not definitely identified until the early 20c. It was a highly infectious disease commonly found in workhouses, jails and schools and quickly spread on towels, bedding and by close contact with an infected person. It begins with just one or two transient reddish patches usually on the face, around the mouth and behind the ears but it can spread to any part of the body. These areas then erupt into yellow itching pustules which appear in clusters and turn into blisters that burst forming a thick sticky, gummy substance – hence honey sickness. If the area is touched the fluid is easily spread affecting other parts of the body.

Joan then described the **I**tch Mite (Scabies) which has been around for 100s of years and is still quite common today. It gets its name from the intense itching caused by the female mite burrowing and feeding under the skin. The favourite sites are just between the fingers, the wrist, elbows and knees but can spread anywhere. The male stays on the surface of the skin but the female, once pregnant bores deeply into the skin to lay an egg, burrows a bit deeper and lays another egg and so on. Itch Mites were easily spread and were common in schools, hospitals, workhouses and jails. Joan went on to describe the hatching of the mites – I think everyone was itching and scratching by the end of the talk!

Joan mentioned **J**ail or Hospital fever (typhus), head and body lice - washing or changing of clothes was not a priority and they were worn until they dropped off – leeches which are still used successfully, lupus, mastitis, necrosis, ring worm, scrofula, smallpox, tape worms, thread worms, and even covered **Q** the Quack Doctor, **X**-rays, **Y**ellow fever and **Z** – zymotic diseases. The book, A Dictionary of Medical & Related Terms for Family Historians can be obtained from Joan at 17 New Meadows, Upper Haugh, Rotherham S62 7FD at a cost of £5.75 + 75p pp.

Joan finished by saying goodnight – sleep tight and mind the bugs don't bite!

Stella Vessey – Member No. 38