

# How significant was the Cholera epidemic in changing the government's approach to Public Health?

## Story

Create a title for each paragraph.

The article below examines the causes, symptoms, treatments, and consequences of the Cholera outbreaks.

Summarise each paragraph in 1 or 2 bullet points.

In 1831, cholera arrived in Britain, killing 50,000 people. The main symptoms of the disease was violent sickness, painful diarrhoea, and skin and nails turning black. Finally a victim would fall into a coma and die. So many people were dying that cemeteries were closed because they were too full: bodies that were buried often poked through the surface of the ground, letting off a horrible smell.

Many people still believed in miasma theory and that 'infectious mist' given off by rotting animals, rubbish, and sewage caused infection. People didn't realise the importance of clean water.

In 1837 and 1838 more people died from cholera. In 1839 the government asked Edwin Chadwick to find out what the health and living conditions of poor people was like across Britain. The Chadwick report found that conditions were awful and health was very poor.

Chadwick highlighted the need for cleaner streets and showed people that the public were not to blame for bad housing and living conditions. It put pressure on the government to do something to improve public health but they did not do anything.

The cholera outbreaks changed the minds of the government. When cholera returned again in the 1840s, the **Public Health Act** was signed. This gave local councils the power to spend money on cleaning their towns (but it was not compulsory!). Many towns didn't do anything because they didn't have to!

Cholera returned in 1848 killing 60,000 people. In 1854 another 20,000 died. In 1854, Dr John Snow linked cholera to the dirty water that people were drinking. With government permission, Snow stopped people drinking local water, forcing people to get water elsewhere – there were no more deaths in the street!

Snow proved that cholera was not carried by the air, but was instead caught by coming into direct contact with someone who had cholera, or in this case, drinking some water contaminated by a victim's diarrhoea. John Snow's work pressured the government into changing their policies on public health.

## Source

**A**

**An extract from Chadwick's report published in 1842**

'Disease is caused by bad air and diseases are common all over the country. The bad air is caused by rotting animals and vegetables and filth, when these things are improved, the death rate goes down.

A medical officer should be appointed to take charge of each district. More people are killed by filth and bad ventilation each year than they are by wars. The poor cost us too much...a healthier work force would work harder too...

**B**

**CHOLERA.**

**THE DUDLEY BOARD OF HEALTH,**  
HEREBY GIVE NOTICE, THAT IN CONSEQUENCE OF THE  
**Church-yards at Dudley**

Being so full, no one who has died of the **CHOLERA** will be permitted to be buried after **SUNDAY** next, (To-morrow) in either of the Burial Grounds of *St. Thomas's, or St. Edmund's*, in this Town.

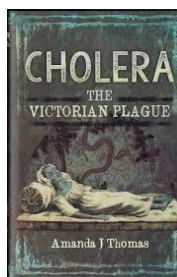
All Persons who die from **CHOLERA**, must for the future be buried in the Church-yard at Netherton

BOARD OF HEALTH, DUDLEY.



**Historian Pamela K. Gilbert writing in her essay on Britain's response to Cholera (2007)**

'The progress of sanitary reform was slow. Meanwhile the medical profession increasingly began to see its role in government as protecting the people, but also as disciplining and educating the poor and working classes who were believed not to understand what they needed to do for their own good. Many sanitary reformers assumed that people chose to be dirty. The Government began slowly to move towards a more proactive and interventionist model of care for public health involving prevention, hygiene and education.'



**Historian Amanda J. Thomas writing in her book 'Cholera: The Victorian Plague'**

'Conditions for the labouring poor were not to change for many years, and comprehensive, free health care would only become available to all with the establishment of the National Health Service after WWII...up until the 1960s and beyond, working people continued to live in polluted, densely populated urban environments...had politics not got in the way, perhaps greater progress might have been made...'

This cartoon entitled "Death's dispensary" was published in a British magazine in 1666. The caption reads 'OPEN TO THE POOR GRATIS [for free] PERMISSION OF THE PARISH'.

**C**



## Scholarship

### Task 1

Read through the **Story** of the events of the Cholera epidemic. For each paragraph, you need to create a 'title' on one side, and a short summary (two bullet points maximum) on the other.

### Task 2

Look at **source A, B, and C**. In your book, write a short description of the message of each source. Then answer the question "What do these sources tell you about impact of Cholera on Britain?"

### Task 3

Read through Gilbert and Thomas' **scholarship** about the Cholera outbreak. Highlight what you think are the three most important sentences. In your book, answer the question "According to historians, what impact did the government have on the health of the people during the cholera outbreak?"