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Uncertainty and Emotion in the 1900 Sydney Plague

CUP Element Video Abstract

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In the late 19th century, the third global pandemic of the bubonic plague spread across the world, mostly through trade between ports with the British Empire. It reached Sydney in 1900. This was a period of transition, both in the growth and development of the city and in medical knowledge. This Element focuses on the power of emotion in the early stages of the pandemic in Sydney, as well as how it shaped the individual, social and institutional responses that followed. I will begin with a discussion of the theoretical debates which inform my reading of the events. I am particularly interested in the plasticity of the disgust reaction and why that plasticity is important in disease events and social interactions. I argue that both the affect and the emotion of disgust are influenced by knowledge, culture and language, even if affect is more immediately realised by the body. The things we are disgusted by are influenced by what we learn is disgusting or dirty. This plasticity or changing understanding of what is deemed disgusting could be observed in the Sydney 1900 plague and it provides a basis for theorising the role of intention and meaning in how we learn to respond to things and events with disgust.

During a disease outbreak, the category of dirt or what we respond to with aversion will change depending on our certainty or lack of certainty about what constitutes a threat. What belongs to the category of disgust objects is to some extent flexible. Yet new priorities and information can overcome disgust, including a desire for connection with others. 1900 was a formative time in Sydney, the end of a century and the final year before the self-governing colonies were federated in the Commonwealth of Australia. The relatively successful response of the Board of Health in its analysis and management of the plague established its authority within New South Wales and in Australia more broadly. As people demanded their institutions do more to protect them from the terrifying scourge of contagion, notwithstanding the times when politicians overruled the board's advice, public health filled a governance gap created by inefficient municipal systems and tried to protect people from an invisible threat, emerging as a powerful social pillar within Sydney. I argue that in Sydney in 1900 there was evidence of the strategic mobilisation of the symbolism of dirt in discourse to channel and produce the response of disgust and to advocate for specific political solutions. Actions such as fumigating the city sewers or demolishing properties did not always have their basis in confident public health strategy and were often reactive, aiming to manage the emotions of the public rather than the public health. In the concluding discussion, I consider the extent to which our aversion to certain smells or sights helps us to avoid pathogenic bacteria, and whether this has in fact shaped the response.