

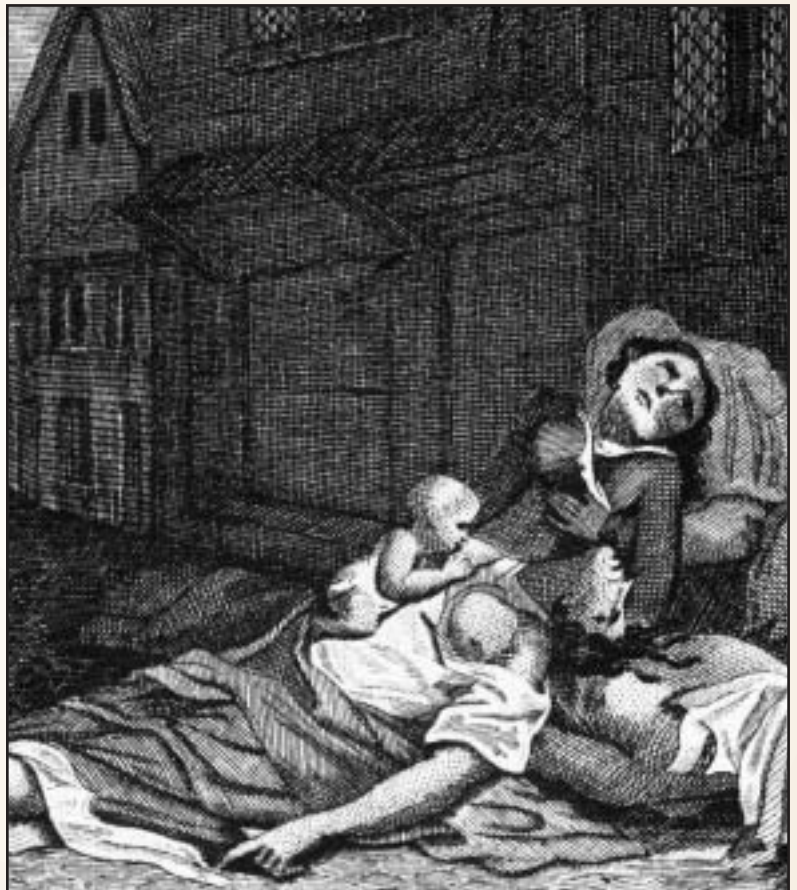
## “Bring Out Your Dead!”

By Lawrence Segel, MD

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That enduring blood-chilling cry of 17th century London body collectors, nervously sitting atop their horse-drawn carts, echoed throughout a city filled with hopelessness and doom.

Today, that scene stands out vividly in our imaginations as representative of a time when mankind was afflicted with one of its cruellest scourges. The bubonic plague, also known as the “Black Death,” came in three major epidemics, in the 6th, 14th, and 17th centuries. The last two epidemics ravaged Europe (1348 through 1666) taking as many as tens of millions of lives. Some estimates of the victims go as high as one-third of Europe’s population. One of the plague’s great chroniclers was Daniel



Defoe. His historical novel, “A Journal of the Plague Year,” stands out, not only as a reminder of the virulence of the disease, but as a fascinating commentary on the moral, ethical and social effects the pestilence had on London’s devastated people.

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# A Journal of the Plague Year

Defoe wrote the novel in 1721 when it appeared the plague would again threaten Europe. It had last ravaged London in 1665. Although a work of fiction written as seen through the eyes of a resolute London saddler, the book is often mistaken for an eyewitness, autobiographical account. Given the topic, it is not surprising the writing is stiff with a textbook quality, and casts a heavy pall. Defoe fastidiously depicts the plague-ridden city of 1665 in which both physician and clergy seem equally powerless to stop the onslaught. Work ceases. People abandon their families and friends. They shut themselves off from the world. The funeral rites become perfunctory, or cease altogether, and the carts, “the ceaseless carts” deliver bodies, some still warm, to the makeshift pits serving as communal burial grounds.

## Unstoppable

Many thought that the plague was the wrath of God, righteous anger in the form of an Old Testament apocalypse, and they fought it with prayer. Any house affected was quarantined by “watchmen,” and an apt blood-red cross was marked on the door with the words, “Lord, have mercy upon us.”

Physicians of the time could do nothing to stop the plague. It killed with lightening speed.

Giovanni Boccaccio, writing 400 years earlier in the *Decameron* (a novel set in plague-infested Italy) backs up Defoe’s writing: “[Its victims] ate lunch with their friends and dinner with their ancestors in paradise.” Defoe puts forth the best theories of the 17th century and early 18th century by explaining that physicians postulated the infection was carried in the air, and tells us they used all manner of fumes, incense, and smoke to combat it. Quarantine was used extensively, but ineffectively, and the best advice a physician could give (and which many followed themselves) was to flee to the country. For those who stayed in the city, “the plague defied all medicines; the very physicians were seized with it.” Clergy, nurses and doctors visiting the sick became ill upon return from their duties, and were soon numbered among the dead.



# Profits to be Made

As is often the case in such hopeless situations, all manner of quackery and corruption grew up. Posts were plastered with fraudulent advertisements for such cures as “Infallible” preventative pills, “Never-failing” preservatives, “Sovereign” cordials, and “The royal antidote.” Defoe tells us that few physicians were also overcome by greed and lived by the creed, “I give my advice to the poor for nothing, but not my physick (medicine).”

# No Immunity

What have we learned since Defoe wrote his novel? For one thing, the 20th and 21st centuries are not immune. To be sure we have had small outbreaks of bubonic plague in recent years, but there have been worse banes as grisly as “Black Death” to test our mettle and satisfy the apocalypse believers. The influenza epidemic of 1918-19 killed 25 million people, leaving physicians numb in its wake. More recently, the AIDS epidemic has shown us that modern medicine has not yet conquered the reaches of the deadly microbial world. Most illuminating is our “modern” attitude to such diseases. Are there still not shrieks of prejudice and vexation, that this is the will of God directed at his sinning creatures? Can humanity truthfully say that it has never fled, abandoned or ostracized the afflicted? What about the burgeoning quack trade, or the rare physician who refuses to attend the contagious sick? No doubt, our medical knowledge is superior to anything in prior times, but, in some ways aren’t our attitudes toward the infected and infectious similar to Defoe’s description of the 17th century society?

# Conclusion

“Bring out your dead,” is indeed a chilling epitaph for that deadly period of history about which Defoe wrote. Humanity’s terrified disposition towards a more modern plague, such as AIDS, might arguably be epitomized as, “Throw out your living.” A critical look at Defoe’s book is to be encouraged, not for its suspenseful plot, or invigorating characters, because there are none. Rather, read it because it might point out some similarities between past and present ethics and morality we care not to admit.

Reading

Defoe, D: *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Signet Classics, New York, New York, 1960.