

Just What Did Cause Their Death?

Today if we are ill, we visit a doctor and perhaps they order some tests, determine and give appropriate treatment. We may have to spend some time in hospital. While our current health system is not perfect, free health care is available.

In the mid-1800s there had been a major shift to urban areas and around 80% of the population were living in urban areas. There is no sanitation and no treated water and epidemics are common.

It is a time of many infectious diseases including tuberculosis, typhoid, cholera, diphtheria and you are treated for the symptoms not the cause, as at this time, the cause is not known. A time when there are no antibiotics and it is believed that tuberculosis does not spread from person to person. A time when more than a third of young children dies before they are two years old. Germ theory did not yet exist and it was believed that disease was caused by miasma (bad air) and an intemperate lifestyle.

A person dies and in England until 1874 there is no requirement for a doctor to certify the cause of death (in Australia this was only became mandatory in all states in 1910).

A death certificate was required before a person could be buried but any person present at the death could notify the registrar.

Death certificates are an essential item for family historians as it is the only time when we can legally “kill off” people. We are interested in the cause of death, at times to see if there is a family history of a disease or perhaps hoping to see clues to further research such as “Burns and suffocation following an explosion of fire damp at Universal Colliery” or the more exotic “Hung for Murder”.

Death certificates were not created for family historians and it is thanks to a statistician that we actually have a cause of death on the certificate. Death certificates began at different times depending where your ancestor was:

- England and Wales 1837
- Tasmania 1838
- Western Australia 1841
- South Australia 1842
- Victoria 1853
- Scotland 1855
- New South Wales (Queensland) 1856
- Northern Territory (NSW 1856-1863) (SA 1863-1870) NT 1870-

- Queensland 1859 (NSW 1856)
- Ireland 1865

The information contained on the death certificate also varied but on an English/Welsh certificate you would find:

- Date and Place of Death
- Name and Surname of Deceased
- Sex
- Age
- Occupation
- Cause of death
- Informant's details
- Date of Registration

Remember that most of the information on a death certificate is not primary information as the person who knows the answer is dead.

There are also many possibilities for error as the name is the name known to the informant which may not have been the name the deceased was christened or even used during their early life, the age is also variable, the occupation is likely to be the last occupation and may not be the deceased's primary occupation, the cause of death may be decided based on symptoms rather than an actual medical cause as we would expect today. Doctors were expensive and even after it was mandatory for a doctor to certify death they may not have been in attendance prior to the death.

The place of death is not necessarily the person's usual residential address as they may have been travelling or have visited a family member for support while they were ill, or possibly a workhouse or even a hospital.

The informant's details can give valuable relationships even if a relationship is not stated.

Causes of Death

The listed cause of death may not mean much to modern readers: Marasmus, Inanition, Teething, Jail Fever, Convulsions, Exhaustion of Nervous System, Death Struck, Galloping Consumption, Great Pox French Disease, Phossy Jaw, Act of God, Anasarca, Anthracosis, Cholera infantum, Horrors, King's Evil, Mortification or Phthisis.

Many of these are the symptoms rather than the real cause. Children did not die of teething but did die of a bacterial or viral illness due to going to solid foods/water/milk which were contaminated. Act of God, God Struck and Taken by God usually meant a sudden, unexpected death, possibly a stroke, aneurysm or heart attack.

There were often many names for the same disease and this could vary by geographic region: French Pox, Bad Blood, Congenital Lues. Lues, Foetal syphilis, General Paralysis of the Insane (tertiary syphilis), Great Pox, Italian Disease, French distemper, Lepra

Syphilitica, Rupia (deep red sores seen in syphilis), Cupid's disease are all names for syphilis.

Smallpox, plague, cholera, malaria and yellow fever are all diseases we associate with particular geographic locations around the world but with the movement of soldiers, sailors and traders unexpected diseases could appear anywhere. Also some diseases not seen in an area today were common in the past: marsh fever (malaria possibly or could be an arbovirus) was commonly seen in southern areas in England.

As mentioned you could get many names for the same disease but the other issue was that many diseases were diagnosed by symptom and many diseases have similar symptoms so different disease causes could also be named the same on a death certificate. Typhus and typhoid are two diseases where this particularly occurs.

Doctors also tended to "Latinise" some symptoms and diseases.

Resources

When you come across a term you do not know there are a number of options:

- An old medical dictionary – pre 1920
- Google it!
- Cyndi's list
- Rudy's Archaic Terms www.antiquusmorbius.com

To see how medical history impacted your ancestors try Google Books or Internet.org for PDF copies of old books and pamphlets on medical diagnosis and treatment.

The British Medical Journal is also a great read for old diseases and treatments and if you have any medical personnel in your family there are many genealogical items such as births, marriages, deaths and obituaries listed within its pages.

Newspapers are also a fantastic resource for news of epidemics, treatments, advertisements for wonder pills that cure everything and even admissions and discharges from hospital, depending on the size and circulation of the paper.

Trove <http://trove.nla.gov.au/> a free resource with many Australian digitised papers, Papers Past <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/> a free resource with many New Zealand papers and the British Newspaper Archive a pay site with many English and now also some Irish, Scottish and Welsh papers <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

And there is my book "Death Certificates and Archaic Medical Terms" available from Gould Genealogy <http://www.gould.com.au/>

I am always interested in any unusual terms you may find as a cause of death and am happy to help interpret, please email me at HVSresearch@bigpond.com



