The Plague

Learning Objectives

STUDENTS SHOULD LEARN:

- About aspects of life in 1900's San Francisco
- About the nature and impact of bubonic plague on a point in San Francisco and United States History
- How people in the early 20th Century thought they could cure the plague
- How to make deductions based on evidence

Extension Activities

- Ask students to write quiz questions in form of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” and the run the quiz.
- Ask students to imagine how plague events might have unfolded if circumstances had been different (i.e.) government officials admitting to the plague epidemic sooner; not localizing the quarantine to Chinatown.
- Ask students to keep a diary, imagining they are a shopkeeper in San Francisco during the 1900 Plague. Produce a number of entries for a number of dates and events.

Using the Student Worksheets

The Dungeon’s worksheets are designed to give your students an idea of the magnitude of the plague, focusing on a key point in history when San Francisco’s Chinatown was gripped by the Plague – 1900.

**STUDENT WORKSHEET 1** sets the scene for students in 1900. Activities ask them to consider the horrible symptoms of the illness.

**STUDENT WORKSHEET 2** asks students to consider some of the crazy cures and plague preventative used by people in 1900 and to write a letter of advice to a friend in Chinatown stricken by the plague.

**STUDENT WORKSHEET 3** is a sheet of cards for photocopying. In their groups, students must sort the cards into causes and effects of the plague. Following this, ask them to sort their cards into long and short-term effects.

Discussion Points

- How was the plague discovered in San Francisco?
- What actions were taken to stem the plague in Chinatown? Were these actions considered “fair”?
- Was there a cultural bias in the handling of the San Francisco Plague?
The Plague

Scary Symptoms

First came a bad cold, then vomiting and fever, and finally repulsive swellings in the armpit and groin, oozing blood and pus. By the time death arrived, most people were grateful for it.

Activity 1

The plague was not a pleasant experience!
Put this list of gruesome symptoms into order that you think a sufferer would have experienced them

- Internal bleeding
- Arms and legs become sore
- Headache, chills and a fever
- Death
- Swellings split open, oozing blood and pus
- Swellings on neck and limbs
- Nausea and vomiting

Did you know?
The bubonic plague was so-called because of the disgusting pus-filled boils or ‘buboes’ that appeared on sufferers.

Student Worksheet 1

And you thought the plague only happened in Europe? No such luck!

The dreaded plague was thought to begin in 1330’s China. The plague was spread by rats that had fleas which carried the virus. When the rats died, their fleas moved onto the humans, and their bites caused bubonic plague.

The plague reached San Francisco in March, 1900. A Chinese-born man who was a long-time resident of Chinatown was found dead of bubonic plague. The next morning, all of China town was quarantined, with policemen preventing “Asiatics” (people of Asian heritage) from either entering or leaving. The San Francisco Board of Health began looking for more cases of plague and began burning personal property and sanitizing buildings, streets and sewers within Chinatown. Chinese Americans protested and the Chinese Benevolent Association threatened lawsuits. The quarantine was lifted but the burning and fumigating continued. A federal court ruled that public health officials could not close off Chinatown without proof that Chinese Americans were any more susceptible to plague than Anglo Americans. However, delays caused by the political infighting probably allowed the plague to spread, and gave it its first foothold in North America. The four-year death toll of the plague was 113 people, almost all from the ten-block area of Chinatown.
Activity 2

People in the 1900’s still practiced medicine in strange ways, even with major medical advances

a) Which four of the following do you think were used as “cures” during the Plague of 1900?

i. Putting the tail feathers of a live chicken onto the boils.
ii. Rubbing antiseptic cream onto the boils.
iii. Drinking lots of water.
iv. Slicing the boils open and burning them with a red-hot poker.
v. Bathing in your own urine.
vi. Eating plenty of fruit and vegetables.

b) Which three of the following do you think were used to ‘prevent’ the plague?

i. Taking aspirin.
ii. Sterilising everything in the house.
iii. Eating a balanced diet.
iv. Smoking tobacco.
v. Smelling sweet herbs or flowers.
vi. Praying.

Activity 3

Imagine you are a doctor living at the time of the plague in San Francisco.

Write a reply to the letter below from John Smith, a friend living in San Francisco near Chinatown.

Remember, a doctor in 1900 would not give the same advice as a modern day doctor.

My Dear Friend,

I am writing you to beg you for advice. The unthinkable has happened – Plague has come to San Francisco!

Apparently, it is most prevalent among the Asiatic people in Chinatown, which is just a few blocks from our home.

The whole of Chinatown is quarantined – no one in or out for the last week or so, but I fear it might be too late for our neighborhood. Several of my neighbors have complained of headaches and fever.

I understand these are early symptoms of the plague. I have not allowed any of my family out for days, but we will soon run out of food and provisions.

Your advice in avoiding this horrible sickness would be greatly appreciated.

Yours humbly,

John T. Smith
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politicians denying the existence of the Plague in San Francisco to prevent panic</th>
<th>Body discovered with first case of plague was a Chinese person</th>
<th>Quarantine of Chinatown</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Benevolent Society protests quarantine of Chinatown</td>
<td>Lack of immediate aid received to help combat plague</td>
<td>Burning of personal property and belongings by Department of Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plague runs rampant in 10 block area of Chinatown</td>
<td>Sewers and residences in Chinatown are sanitized by Board of Health</td>
<td>Rats carrying plague infested fleas flee from sewers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Residents hide sick and dead from city inspectors looking for plague victims</td>
<td>Authorities considered Chinese population resistant to government regulation</td>
<td>Court rules to have Quarantine lifted in San Francisco’s Chinatown</td>
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