

2021. "Fear in epidemic crisis: a historic approach", Francisco G. Nunes, Elsa Pegado (coords.), *Societal Health Notebooks: Mental health and well-being*, nº 2, Lisboa, Iscte-Saúde: Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, pp. 65-73. ISSN: 2184-9676. <https://www.iscte-iul.pt/conteudos/iscte-saude/2080/saude-societal>, https://www.iscte-iul.pt/assets/files/2021/12/22/1640190446034_Saude_Societal_02_2021_EN.pdf.

Title: Fear in epidemic crisis: an historic approach

Author: Maria Antónia Pires de Almeida

Abstract:

Mental health in epidemic periods is a recurrent theme, as well as epidemics themselves. Based on an investigation of news and advertisements published in the generalist press, we became aware of the importance of disseminating scientific knowledge to a wide audience and of the themes addressed in these periods of health crises, which affected the economy, society and politics. This article addresses the effect that new diseases had on the more intimate behaviour of affected populations. From the ancestral fear of hospitals, places associated with a certain death, to the fear of the unknown, in the face of diseases whose causes and their treatments had not yet been identified by science. The sanitary measures applied by the authorities have always aroused antagonistic reactions due to the deprivations to which the affected populations were subject. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, daily newspapers were fundamental vehicles in the transmission of scientific knowledge, health advice and standards, and the discussions that these novelties have raised.

Key words: newspapers, epidemics, fear, guilt, punishment

Article:

This research on epidemics and pandemic periods in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was based on news and advertisements published in the generalist press. It revealed the concerns of health authorities and their efforts to divulge the knowledge of the time about diseases, their prevention and known treatments, sanitary and hygienic advice. Newspaper editors played a fundamental role in the publication of this information, never failing to clearly express their opinions on the containment measures adopted by governments. In times of huge shortages in public assistance to patients, the newspapers themselves took initiatives to organize fundraising to improve the lives of groups most affected by situations of need caused by diseases and by the consequences of sanitary measures and military sieges on cities. Among the topics covered, fear assumes an importance that is reflected in the news about the diseases, especially due to the novelty and lack of knowledge about the new epidemics that swept Europe, taking doctors by surprise and without great possibilities for diagnosis or treatment.

Faced with a population weakened by poor hygiene and food conditions, combined with endemic diseases that kept population growth and life expectancy at very low levels, the

first cholera pandemic reached Europe and the United States in the 1930s and shook the moral and cultural structures of the Western world. The succession of epidemic waves of this disease, whose transmission was only scientifically established decades later, led to discussions in International Health Conferences that brought together the best experts of the time from all countries involved, in an attempt to establish common rules for controlling the spread and to minimize “the delays and inconveniences that subjected international trade” (Garnel, 2009). In an already globalized world, where the circulation of raw materials and manufactured products assumed growing importance, the interdiction of ports during these sanitary crises caused constraints that put food supply at risk, especially in countries like Portugal, where there was never self-sufficiency. The same applied to sanitary cords, which prevented the movement of people and goods, directly leading to situations of generalized shortages and hunger.

Therefore, fear of the disease was associated with fear of the consequences of sanitary measures to contain epidemics and the resulting economic paralysis.

There were several fears that plagued the populations and that were expressed in the news throughout the nineteenth century. Starting with the fear associated with the concepts of guilt and sin. In a Catholic country with a strong Church influence, even in revolutionary periods when anticlericalism prevailed, the issue of behaviour affected the way people related to their bodies. If something bad happened, the reason was more easily attributed to divine causes, especially in the absence of scientific explanations and effective treatments. With the spread of cholera throughout all social classes, regardless of good or bad actions, this structure of thought was called into question, which certainly contributed to the malaise of a society that did not yet have the scientific capacity to solve the problem.

Thus, and to counter the trend of the authorities towards sanitary cords and drastic measures prohibiting freedom of movement and trade, since the mid-nineteenth century we have found news that not only deny the epidemic, but attribute it to deviant behaviour, increasing personal responsibility on the transmission of the disease and creating even more fear and even terror.

“This is the time of year we fear the most. It’s the time for cucumbers, prunes, poorly seasoned fruits, which our peasants, not through hunger but out of vice and reprehensible abuse, will not stop eating” (*O Século*, 14 Aug 1855).

The quotation above shows the arguments used to deny the cholera morbus epidemic of 1855 in Portugal: the poor were sick of their own behalf, because they had reprehensible vices and behaviours. Therefore, all the sanitary measures issued by the

authorities, particularly in Porto, where quarantine to ships and transit and the prohibition of markets were imposed, were regarded as unnecessary. There was the need to re-establish trade freedom (Almeida, 2013b). Newspapers in Porto were particularly active in this campaign to end the sanitary cord, protesting “inept measures, which greatly harm the public, and especially the commercial class” (*O Comércio*, 16 May 1855). Advice on hygiene multiplied: cholera “is easily avoided. It’s necessary not to be afraid, and to observe hygienic advices...” (*O Século*, 13 May 1855). These were isolation of the sick and cleaning of houses and clothes, stressing the importance of opening windows and airing houses to get rid of “putrid miasmas”, considered the main source of contamination.

“The best way to purify the air in a room currently occupied by a sick person is to renew it by opening the doors and windows (...) Those who live in country houses or farms, in addition to cleaning and ventilating the rooms, must not consent manure houses with stagnant waters nearby, because they produce exhalations that can cause putrid fevers, especially during the heat of summer...” (*O Comércio*, 6 Jun 1855).

When markets were prohibited in June 1855, the press reacted in defence of local commerce, small producers, and consumers: “We have already demonstrated, and still no one has convinced us otherwise, that the suspension of large markets is an evil and a desperate resource, which, without a recognized advantage over the invasion of cholera, is the origin of serious disturbances for commerce (...) which visibly damages all industries...” (*O Comércio*, 26 Jul 1855). “If, as is generally believed, hunger is one of the causes that has contributed the most to the disease, the ban on markets will increase it” (*O Comércio*, 30 Jul 1855). “Banning markets is a greater calamity than the transmission of evil, because the resulting evil is much greater, increasing misery...” (*O Comércio*, 1 Aug 1855). To make matters worse, some doctors abandoned villagers to their fate, as well as the authorities: “We know, for sure, that the authorities of Caminha, military, judicial and fiscal, fled that village in fear of cholera!!!” (*O Século*, 04 Nov 1855). No wonder that, in addition to fear of divine punishment, people found themselves helpless, which, according to newspapers at the time, further increased the symptoms of cholera: “terror is one of the powerful causes for the onset of the disease... .”; “there is nothing more fatal than the fear of the epidemic when it exists” (*O Comércio*, 27 Aug 1855 and 28 Sep 1855), causing death “perhaps more from terror than from disease” (*O Comércio*, 20 Sep 1854) . Even scientific experiments were carried out in this regard:

“Lately, wrote the *Journal of Frankfurt*, a doctor from Vienna, Dr. F..., carried out an interesting experiment to find out what influence the fear of cholera could exert on an individual in perfect health. After obtaining the consent of the competent authority, Dr.

F... promised a convict, robust and healthy, that the sentence would be commuted if he consented to get into bed with a man who had just died from cholera. (...) After a few hours all symptoms manifested themselves, and a formal cholera attack was observed. All the treatments were done to him, and thanks to his strong constitution he was saved. But what was the surprise of the assistants when Dr. F... declared that the one with whom the condemned man had fallen into bed had not died of cholera! Dr. F ... had made him believe this to observe the effect of imagination and fear on the organism" (*O Comércio*, 31 Oct 1855).

As a treatment against this powerful psychological factor, peace of mind and good humour were advised: "The first physician of the King of Saxony, Norbeck, gives the following advice as a preservative against cholera influences. Take 20 shots of warmth, 5 shots of cleansing, 12 shots of morality, 1 shot of activity, 2 shots of good sleep, 10 shots of fresh air, and 50 shots of peace of mind. These 100 parts put together form an excellent anti-choleric. This prescription contains serious advice in joking form. The reader will note that it is tranquillity of mind that is represented by the highest dose (...) it is now well established that fear is the only cause of a good half of the accidents attributed to the scourge. As for the other half, imprudence is enough to explain most of them. If the populations wanted to observe the simple hygienic prescriptions that have been indicated to them, and keep some cold blood, cholera would lose, with its prestige, the sad privilege of making more victims than other diseases" (*O Comércio*, 13 Sep 1854).

The same was observed during the bubonic plague epidemic that hit Porto in 1899, when Ricardo Jorge, municipal doctor, and director of public disinfection facilities, put in place hygiene measures considered violent by the "filthiest classes" (Jorge, 1899). For the cleaning of individuals and their houses, doctors made inspections on the poorest neighbourhoods, with cleaning brigades paid by the municipality and accompanied by the police (*O Comércio do Porto*, 29 Sep 1899), burning clothes and mattresses, sometimes the houses themselves, and forcing people to bathe. Ricardo Jorge ordered public bathhouses to be built and took precautions against the rats that infested the city, not only distributing poison, but also taking care of the waters where the poison and dead rats were found. People in poor neighbourhoods did not accept such actions peacefully and responded with civil unrest. There was a lack of understanding regarding sanitary measures and fear of the disease and its treatments. All of this excited the population, who demonstrated against the representatives of the health authority, against doctors in general and against Ricardo Jorge in particular. Several doctors were stoned, and bombs exploded on the streets and in some houses.

“If any exaltation reigns in Porto, it is against the exaggerations of sanitary measures, especially against the inconsistency of some orders. At night, around 10, Maria Oliveira Pinho, widow of a man who died at the Misericórdia hospital, jumped from the 3rd floor of the house on Rua Escura, when clinicians classified the case as bubonic plague. For this reason, many people gathered in Rua Escura to accompany the injured woman to the Misericórdia hospital. During the journey, there were hostile demonstrations against the municipal doctor” (*Diário de Notícias*, 20 Aug 1899). The news referred to Ricardo Jorge, who at the end of September resigned and moved to Lisbon, where he was appointed General Inspector of the Health Services of the Kingdom and professor of Hygiene at the Medical and Surgical School of Lisbon.

The Church also contributed to the dissemination of hygienic measures, emphasizing the spiritual issues associated with the disease: awareness and peace of mind to prevent it and fear as a dissemination factor, repeating what was observed in the cholera epidemic four decades earlier. “Pastoral of the Cardinal Patriarch (...) with the following prophylactic instructions: '1st Cleansing of the soul, through a well-made confession, with the firm intention to change one's life (...) A good conscience produces a certain well-being of spirit and body that generates trust in God (...) thus lessens the terror of death, the main driver of the plague, after it has been declared; 2nd Cleaning of the body and housing, and therefore the use of disinfectants, such as vases with lime chloride in homes...’” (*Diário de Notícias*, 04 Sep 1899).

The year 1918 was particularly dramatic in terms of health. If the First World War caused the death of nine million soldiers, plus thirteen million civilians (Keegan, 1993), the pneumonic flu, which the movements of the armies spread around the world, proved to be “one of the worst epidemic scourges of human history”, killing 50 to 100 million people (Killingray, 2009). The Portuguese Expeditionary Corps mobilized around 55,000 soldiers, of which 7,000 died (Marques, 2008). The official report on the flu in Portugal pointed to 59,000 deaths between 1918 and 1919, with a mortality rate of 9.8 per thousand. Later studies point to 135,257, which was considered a “true hecatomb” with “dramatic human contours” (Sobral, Sousa, Lima, Castro, 2009).

In Porto the flu found a population already extremely debilitated by multiple endemic diseases, among which tuberculosis stands out, aggravated by sanitary conditions that had not yet been subject to significant improvements, and by an epidemic of exanthematic typhus that preceded it (Almeida, 2013a).

One of the most important advices in epidemic periods was the hospitalization of patients, which confronted the fear these institutions provoked: they were considered

places where people went to die. These assistance establishments conveyed an image of squalor and misery and were traditionally associated with poverty and groups that were unable to receive medical treatment at home (Almeida, 2008). For almost all illnesses the implicit rule was that people stayed at home, were cared for by their family and neighbours, and died in their own bed. Slowly, the introduction of medicine into private life changed mentalities, but the effects on hospital attendance only became visible in the second half of the 20th century.

On February 1918 the exanthematic typhus epidemic caused a mortality rate that reached 10 per cent in hospitals, and higher at home. “Despite the prophylactic measures and the efforts employed by the health delegation of this city, the epidemic of exanthematic typhus has increased in recent days. From Saturday to Sunday, around 60 people were admitted to the Joaquim Urbano Hospital with typhus attacks (...) That hospital is completely full of patients, making accommodation difficult in the different wards...” (*O Comércio do Porto*, 12 Feb 1918). People who did not comply with periods of isolation and mandatory sanitary inspections were considered “offenders of sanitary regulations” (*O Comércio do Porto*, 07 Jun 1918). They could be fine or even arrested, which did not prevent some patients from fleeing these dens of disease and death and from doing everything they could to avoid hospitalizations: “Alfredo Caldeira was arrested and sent to Bonfim Hospital. He had escaped from that hospital on the 9th of the month, where he was being treated for typhus” (*Diário de Notícias*, 14 Feb 1918); “A waiter at the Hotel Nacional, Miguel Rodrigues, born in Pontevedra, having been attacked with typhus, was ordered to go to the typhus hospital. However, the waiter was so frightened that he locked himself in his room and shot himself in the head with a revolver, dying instantly. The corpse was removed to the graveyard” (*Diário de Notícias*, 20 Feb 1918).

With the arrival of the pneumonic flu, President Sidónio Pais made a point of following the matter personally, not neglecting assistance to healed patients and victims’ families, contributing from his own pocket to help fighting the disease, even though the 1911 Constitution already declared the right to public assistance. Also, the National Assistance Fund and the General Health Services had already been created. In addition to the train trip he made to the north to visit flu patients and distribute food, medicine and clothing (*Diário de Notícias*, 24 Sep 1918), the president paid for the “hospitalization of poor patients” and authorized “all expenses incurred as a result of the disease...” (*O Comércio do Porto*, 26 Sep 1918). And he promoted a measure that may have contributed to alleviating the fear of hospitals: “The President of the Republic, given the misery of sick people in hospitals, according to information from the government’s general commissioner, ordered that each discharged patient, alone or with family, should receive

1\$000, and 2\$000 should be given to each family of those who died in hospitals” (*O Comércio do Porto*, 16 Oct 1918). Civil society responded actively, and newspapers were agents to activate and rally the efforts of the benefactors and collect money.

A common factor in all the above-mentioned epidemics is fear, an “overwhelming presence” (Santos, 2006) that is rooted in anxiety, a feature of contemporary society (Snowden, 1995). As well as the moral issue of the disease and the behavioural factor: epidemics as punishment for unruly behaviour, which included eating raw fruits and vegetables, or even sexual excesses, referred to in the eighth “prophylactic instruction on bubonic plague” in 1899 (*Diário de Notícias*, 10 Sep 1899). These concepts of merit, sin and punishment are a religious heritage that science has absorbed and still does not deny, as it has incorporated it into its discourse. Lack of hygiene and socially reprehensible behaviour are always associated with disease and the guilt factor is still there (Crespo, 1990).

These prejudices were strongly manifested in the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. Those who caught the disease were viewed as having deviant behaviour, which resulted, in those days, in the lack of stronger measures to fight it. And it continues to be the case with cancer, or obesity, and currently with individual accountability for the spread of the covid-19 pandemic, ignoring that there are situations, such as public transportation, in which responsibility rests with their managers.

The effects on mental health resulting from sanitary measures imposed since March 2020, and their repeated disclosure by the media, are still to be measured, but some cases of suicide, the increase in divorces and other factors are symptoms of the problems that society shall have to face. The fear that has been inflicted on populations will be difficult to overcome, especially on people with previous anxiety problems and mental illnesses that were heightened in this period.

Bibliografia:

Almeida, Maria Antónia Pires (2008). “Percurso de pobreza em meio rural: as mulheres, a doença e o aborto”. André Freire (ed.). *Sociedade Civil, Democracia Participativa e Poder Político. O Caso do Referendo do Aborto, 2007*. Lisboa: Fundação Friedrich Ebert, pp. 21-39.

Almeida, Maria Antónia Pires (2013a). “Epidemics in the news: health and hygiene in the press in periods of crisis”. *Public Understanding of Science*, 22 (7), pp. 886-902.

Almeida, Maria Antónia Pires (2013b). *Saúde pública e higiene na imprensa diária em anos de epidemias, 1854-1918*. Lisboa: Colibri.

Crespo, Jorge (1990). *A História do Corpo*. Lisboa: Difel.

Garnel, Rita (2009). "Portugal e as Conferências Sanitárias Internacionais (Em torno das epidemias oitocentistas de cholera-morbus)". *Revista de História da Sociedade e da Cultura*, 9, pp. 229-251.

Jorge, Ricardo (1899). *Demographia e hygiene da cidade do Porto: clima-população-mortalidade*. Porto: Repartição de Saúde e Hygiene da Câmara.

Keegan, John (1993). *A History of Warfare*. NY: Random House.

Killingray, David (2009). "A pandemia de gripe de 1918-1919: causas, evolução e consequências". José Manuel Sobral, Maria Luísa Lima, Paula Castro e Paulo Silveira e Sousa (orgs.). *A Pandemia Esquecida. Olhares comparados sobre a Pneumónica 1918-1919*. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, pp. 41-61.

Marques, Isabel Pestana (2008). *Das trincheiras, com saudade: a vida quotidiana dos militares portugueses durante a Primeira Guerra Mundial*. Lisboa: A Esfera dos Livros.

Santos, Ricardo Augusto dos (2006). "O Carnaval, a peste e a 'espanhola'". *História, Ciências, Saúde – Manguinhos*, 13 (1), pp. 129-158.

Snowden, Frank Martin (1995). *Naples in the Time of Cholera, 1884-1911*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sobral, José Manuel, Paulo Silveira e Sousa, Maria Luísa Lima, Paula Castro (2009). "Perante a pneumónica: a pandemia e as respostas das autoridades de saúde pública e dos agentes políticos em Portugal (1918-1919)". José Manuel Sobral, Maria Luísa Lima, Paula Castro e Paulo Silveira e Sousa (orgs.). *A Pandemia Esquecida. Olhares comparados sobre a Pneumónica 1918-1919*. Lisboa: Imprensa de Ciências Sociais, pp. 63-91.