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Antonine Plague, Black Death and Smallpox Epidemic versus COVID-19. How Did Humankind Cope with the Grapple Against the Biggest Epidemics, and What Does it Look Like Today?

We have lived in an environment of invisible foes for thousands of years which caused epidemics all over the world². To date, various notes concerning plagues have retained among others in the Bible and ancient texts, including Thucydides or Procopius³.

The most notorious epidemic besetting humanity throughout centuries had been obviously the Black Death, treated by many people as pandemic which had devoured Europe over centuries. Besides, on the whole globe there occurred cyclically other plagues which took its toll. All along the plagues phenomenon has thus caused anxiety, which could have been perceivable inter alia in the Catholics singing the supplication: "From the air, hunger, fire and war, save us Lord!"⁴. Yet the very comprehension what the given plague was and how to ward off it we owe to the 19th and 20th cent. Medicine, mainly medical practitioners from the branch of bacteriology. Medicine did not know any treatment methods for particular diseases for a long time, as well as appropriate "curative" means, thereby causing humankind overmany harm. In each epoch, man's main target was above all to survive and to avert from

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² S. Wrzesiński, *Oddech śmierci. Życie codzienne podczas epidemii*, Kraków 2011, p. 132.

³ F.F. Cartwright, *Niewidoczny wróg. Zarazy i historia*, Warsaw 2005.

⁴ T. Srogosz, *Staropolskie postrzeganie klęsk elementarnych*, [in:] *Staropolski ogląd świata. Materiały z konferencji Wrocław 23–24 października 2004*, eds. B. Rok, F. Wolański, Wrocław 2004, p. 44.

oneself the inevitable death's spectre for as long a period as possible⁵. Thus, the phantom of infectious diseases assailing humanity since time began, which may be grouped into sporadic, endemic, epidemical and pandemic prevalence, procured that people feared every occurring plague in their ambience⁶.

The Antonine Plague, perhaps as one of the first more known to neoteric people, described as *pestis Antonini*, was the greatest epidemic in the Roman Empire period. Termed the pox plague by historians, it was brought to Europe by Roman legions that had returned from eastern campaigns. It had rampaged probably between 165–180 C.E. and claimed the lives of millions of people, among whom there were two Roman emperors. Its name is predominantly connected with the Antonine dynasty, which at that time was the ruling dynasty in Rome and also with a Roman doctor Galen, termed later as Galen's plague. It obviously was not the only massive plague in the world of ancient Rome. Naturally there were more epidemics in the times of the republic and the Roman Empire. It is worth mentioning here the renowned plague in 65 C.E. in the reign of Nero, assessed by many contemporaneous scholars as the "bubonic plague". Being highly contagious and acrimonious, it took the lives of a great deal of human beings. Accounts of witnesses describing the toll of this epidemic were retained to date. The issue at stake here among others is about the Greek doctor Galen who described above all the appearance of a rash by those who were infected. It had covered the area of the whole body in a black color. Today it is inferred that the very pox had reaped its bitter harvest. Further symptoms of infection came from the digestive tract in the shape of diarrhea and this was accurately noticed by Galen, that a black stool meant generally imminent death. Other symptoms were also fever, emesis, bad breath, cold cough and ulceration of larynx and windpipe. Thus, it had been struggled to prevent from these afflictions using contemporary medicine. Unfortunately, any brew or using herbs was to no avail⁷. Bleeding, prayers or casting spells were equally ineffectual.

The apparent consequence of the epidemic was population decline on territories embraced by the disease. It is calculated that in Italy and Gaul there could die on account of the plague even 20% of population and the region, which was profoundly affected by it, was the population of Egypt – there

⁵ S. Leff, V. Leff, *Od czarów do medycyny współczesnej*, Warsaw 1959, p. 5.

⁶ A. Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem. Epidemie chorób zakaźnych w Rzeczypospolitej w XVI–XVIII wieku i ich następstwa demograficzne, społeczno-ekonomiczne i polityczne*, Warsaw 2000, p. 57.

⁷ R.J. Littman, M.L. Littman, *Galen and the Antonine Plague*, „*American Journal of Philology*” 1973, Vol. 94, No. 3, p. 94.

the population decreased by over 30%. Lack of drugs, no help from doctors and bodies not immune to pox were the reason for humankind's desolating. People migrated in shoals to territories free from the plague and escaping – from nowadays perspective – was essentially the most effective method of avoiding the infection. The plague annihilated Rome's peak of puissance, it decimated the empire's capital. Despite saying that it had not directly influenced the empire's decline in the 5th century, it yet prompted Rome towards its downturn. Thus, if we add to this the barbarian invasions into impaired territories, Marcus Aurelius's death, then not only political results can be seen but above all socio-economic (e.g. business or farming slump), depopulation and humanity's death⁸.

The next plague known to us from historical tradition was the Athenian plague (430 B.C) which ravished the ancient city-state – Athens, killing about 75–100 thousands Athenians and weakening their position during the II Peloponnesian war. Thucydides, a Greek historian in his great work entitled “The Peloponnesian war” recounted the contemporaneous plague's course in this way:

[...] it began, as it is said, firstly in Ethiopia, on the south of Egypt, then it pierced to Egypt and Libya and to the [...] Persian country. To Athens it intruded suddenly and originally attacked people living in Piraeus [...].⁹

The disease's scope in the Mediterranean Basin did not constrained itself only to Greece by its own but it ranged over almost all the region.

The diseased body whilst touching did not seem to be excessively inflamed, it was not pale, as well, but blushing, livid and covered with alveoli and ulcers; whereas inside the diseased was so much feverish that the person could not endure even the lightest array or the subtlest covering but wanted to lie naked and preferably would dive into cold water. [...] for the disease flared to genitals, to fingers and toes and caused privation of those body parts, sometimes even the eyes. It happened that humans on the morrow of recovering lost their memory, they did not realize who they are and did not recognize their relatives¹⁰.

The corpses were lying on the city's streets and doctors were powerless. Many did die in loneliness, a few people risked care for the infected ones. The society's decline dawned. Did anything change in that case on this field? For

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian Wars*, Vol. II, Warsaw 2005, pp. 113–114.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

sure the level of today's medicine is quite different then it was as far back as in ancient or modern times. Even today many people are afraid of any contact with the infected, trying to escape to places with safe zone. As for relying to the Athenian plague itself:

In general this plague transcended anything that could be described. It had erupted with howling strength and above all it differed from other diseases in that birds and those tetrapods that consume human flesh (though there were many not injured dead bodies) did not approach them, and if they did so, they perished after first bites¹¹.

Scholars to date try to determine which disease factually had generated the epidemic. There are indecisive arguments, whether one of the first descriptions of the epidemic given by Thucydides, also known as "The Athenian plague" was in fact a plague (it is possible that it was actually typhoid fever, dengue, some kind of pox or virus of haemorrhagic fever).

The Justinian Plague, the next epidemic, involved in turn the Byzantine Empire, including the capital city Constantinople in the years 541–542 A.C. It caused multiple changes in politics, economy and in society, as well as a fair amount of deceases (the number fluctuates betw. 25–50 mln people). It is treated as the largest plague in Europe's stories just before the Black Death in 14th cent., it is accurately termed as the first view of the 14-cent. Plague¹². Procopius from Caesarea himself said about it as follows:

[...] it had fallen on the whole earth, damaging the lives of many, despite differing diametrically from each other and it was not connected with their physical appearance or age...¹³

Scholastic, on the other hand, in his output presented the plague's symptoms in order that future generations could somehow ward it off by trying to comprehend its causes:

[...] By some patients, starting from the head and causing hyperemia of the eyes and the face's swelling, the illness passed into the larynx and extracted the victim from the living ones. Others suffered from loose stools. By some there appeared abscesses around the groin, in the background there was a strong fever and in two, three days the patients died. Others lost their lives in a fit of madness. Also the ulcers appearing on the skin slayed people. It also happened that those individuals once

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² F.K. Kiple, *Great epidemics in the humanity history*, Warsaw 2002, p. 81.

¹³ P. Caesarea, *Secret History*, Warsaw 1989, p. 76.

or twice overcome by the disease and wrested from death's embrace perished on account of repeated attack¹⁴.

After this passage one may note from his utterance, that the guaranty of having a given disease did not ensure the recover. The same situation appears nowadays in any case in the event of COVID-19 in doctors' eyes. We never know how fast a given illness devastates one's organism. People from the past had completely no idea about that. Adding to this relatively weak curing methods opposing leeches or bleeding these were only two from many point-less methods of overcoming the disease. How can we explain the fact that the wounds from the Justinian plague were being poured over with boiling-hot oil? It is worth mentioning that people in antiquity had already come up with the idea of hand disinfection in order to avoid contact with the infected, using to this various means mainly on the basis of vinegar and herbs¹⁵.

However, over time the mentioned plague disappeared, desolating thereby the whole Byzantine empire. A decline of cities set in, many people died, barbarians began to invade the empire had long reaped its gloomy harvest after the plague without any possibility of quick unification.

The most known epidemic is the Black Death the most imminent plague of all time, which had rampaged since the half of the 14th cent., with breaks up until times – the 20th cent.

[...] People died directly on streets diurnally and overnight; death at home was unnoticed until the moment when the odour of decomposing corpse had pierced outside; and their bodies [...]¹⁶.

Thus, the Black Death was a slayer which quickly spread and extinguished merely a half of Europe's medieval population in the 14th cent¹⁷. People had hitherto accepted death as an upcoming and timeous course of events and were not afraid of it. The situation changed in the time of the pest when societies started to treat it as something rapid, mainly evaluated as punishment for sins, dispensation of providence. However, God was not the only one in the eyes of people who had brought such evil onto earth. It was connected with the slowly beginning persecutives of witches in Europe, that were treated as the devil's embodiment; they were being accused of generating fatal plagues on earth. In addition to this, Jews, Romanies, Tatars, foreigners or prostitutes

¹⁴ E. Scholastic, *History of church*, Warsaw 1990, p. 123.

¹⁵ P. Gill, *50 facts with medicine history*, Warsaw 2017, p. 60.

¹⁶ C. Duncan, *Black Death. Epidemics in Europe from antiquity to modern times*, Warsaw 2008, p. 25.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

were a kind of scapegoat and were also accused of acting as a herald of the pest¹⁸. The Middle Ages, as we perfectly know, was a time when everybody could be inculpated of everything and any public death was a great show for them. Linking this with the Black Death, the biggest evil of those times, which had created massive panic in the medieval era¹⁹. Many scholars believe that this plague occurred in Russia or on the territories of Mongolia. However, the fact is that it reached us by the Tatarian horde. Starting in the Crimea, to the Middle East up to the middle of Europe – it had devastated many cities. The factor responsible for its development was primarily the migration of populace where people spread germs, beset by other afflictions²⁰. Those who had been reached by this plague – meaning the black death or other infectious diseases – also had some traits which influenced a quicker incidence rate. Those were primarily women, children, poor people or chronic patients as it is nowadays. Only the inborn immunity, closing for a given period of time in one's habitation or recovering from a particular disease gave a remote assurance of survival. Some had a mild course of the illness but it lasted long. There were also ones who were healthy on the first day and the next day they were already lying in a grave²¹. Giovanni Boccaccio in his work "Decameron" dited how people had been behaving during the pest:

Humans were gathering in their houses where they lived isolated from the whole world. They were eating light dishes, they were drinking exquisite wines with restraint and had not indulged themselves with lust; time had been consumed while they were preoccupied with music and other accessible treats. They did so in order to forget about the plague and death, about which they did not want to hear²².

The work of the Italian artist had a strong influence on the minds of the people of that period, showing the world during the plague. The author of the short story, the unforgettable creative mind of the Renaissance, showed that in the era of the raging epidemic, there were two options – to go into play or wait for the death. For this difficult period, Boccaccio wrote The Decameron, with 100 stories, told in 10 days by 10 Florentines hidden from the plague in

¹⁸ A. Karpiński (ed.), *Wśród córek Eskulapa. Szkice z dziejów medycyny i higieny w Rzeczypospolitej XVI–XVIII wieku*, Warsaw 2015, p. 24.

¹⁹ W. Werner, *Proces w Salem jako błąd lekarski. Polowanie na czarownice w XVII wieku i nowożytna medycyna. Studium analogii*, „Medycyna Nowożytna. Studium nad Historią Medycyny” 2005, Vol. 12, No. 1–2, p. 7.

²⁰ A. Karpiński (ed.), *Wśród córek...*, op.cit., p. 24.

²¹ C. Duncan, op.cit., p. 25.

²² G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Warsaw 1989, p. 8.

a palace outside the city²³. At the beginning of this work, he mentioned what caused this plague:

So I will say that in the year from the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, one thousand three hundred and forty-eight, in the famous city of Florence, the jewel of Italian cities, a plague broke out, brought about by the influence of heavenly bodies or, rightly, sent by God to punish our sins²⁴.

People started to hide, be in quarantine air the rooms – often enough living alone, they were stocked up on food only to have the chance to overcome the plague somehow. Most often they bought crude drugs, herbs for clearing the habitations and other “medicaments” recommended by contemporary medics. Besides, quicksilver had been lubricated on bodies, compresses were being put on wounds, people also eagerly phlebotomized – a prevalent and typical method in the medieval era²⁵. Sad to say, there was still a lack of medics, so people eagerly paid vast amounts of money to “barber surgeons” who were devoid of education in exchange for any help. Their tasks were supervising the sick, standing with the relatives of the infected, recording the demises. The toll of this horrific plague had been taken for the following centuries, devouring millions of lives²⁶. The mentioned epidemic led to a massive depopulation of Europe. Petrarch himself wrote in a letter to his brother as follows:

[...] Will future generations believe that there has been a time when there are hardly any residents on earth?²⁷

Its results impacted mainly on culture on the development of economy, politics and led to many societal changes. What is interesting, is the fact that the same bacterium was responsible for both the black death and the epidemic in the reign of emperor Justinian²⁸.

Thus, there was no bigger lag in history, when the phenomenon of a plague could not be discerned. After the raging of black death, there were its subsequent disease outbreaks, other illnesses attended it, and, surprisingly, some started to die out. Humans feared syphilis which for some time procured that the black death faded into oblivion. Although the times were difficult,

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ P. Gill, *op.cit.*, p. 60.

²⁶ C. Duncan, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 26.

²⁸ J. Ruffie, *History of the epidemic. From the plague to AIDS*, Warsaw 1996, p. 312.

“pseudo-medics” discovered some drugs and new methods of treatment for ailments caused by a particular epidemic. In the 16th and 17th century there occurred small changes on the medical field modern knowledge had been evolving, free from superstitions to a greater extent, and largely experience-based. Nostradamus, an aulic doctor in the 16th cent. in the court of Valois recommended drinking rosehip syrup and clean water during the plague, staying as long as possible in the open air and to bury the deceased as fast as possible in order not to let the dangerous smells plume out of their bodies²⁹. In one of the chronicles in Geneva from 1530 the time of the plague was being described followingly:

[...] in the time when the black death was rampaging, one could see from the windows, how bodies of six or seven deceased were being pulled on a cart... [...] simultaneously, one could spot booging girls around the decedents...³⁰

Paracelsus, in turn, a medic and alchemist from the 17th century, during the epidemics medicated tablets from bread and his own faeces. These should aid the organisms which were prone to infections³¹. Also in his times the attitudes towards medics' grooming and appearance who had contact with the infected, had been altered. The sick were being touched by the use of a stick, and doctors strived to, above all, cover the whole body, so as not to get infected by “bugs”. In the 17th century, there appeared a project of Charles de Lorme pertaining to a coat which had been probably overlaid with wax. Such doctor was obliged to wear black and long gloves and put a mask with a beak on his face, as well. Nowadays such gloomy outfit of an “old-timey” doctor is of course a part of annual carnival in Venice. However, the masks were supposed to protect the barber surgeon or the doctor from the infection in the most possible way. These masks possessed herbs of antiseptic activity inside. Herbs or leaves, that were being used in that centuries, were mainly: mint, camphor, ambergris, juniper, marjoram, angelica, oak leaves, myrrh, aromatic cloves or lemon balm. In this case, what mattered, was above all their intense smell capable of killing the “miasma” or, later termed as polluted air – by means of fumes or miasmas³². In our native literature there are various books, ser-

²⁹ J. Jagła, *Święte uleczenie wobec chorób zakaźnych, dermatologicznych i wenerycznych*, „Medycyna Nowożytna. Studia nad Historią Medycyny” 2011, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 22.

³⁰ J. Ruffie, op.cit., p. 315.

³¹ P. Gill, op.cit., p. 61.

³² J. Ruffie, op.cit., p. 316.

mons, treaties or even poetry dedicated to miasma and ways to ward it off, and in case of becoming ill – to heal. The olden Republic was one of the rare countries that despite creating works about plagues, was a nation free from rampaging epidemics. Perhaps a richer diet, which was full of vegetables and meat was favorable to a lesser involvement of plagues. In addition, people had an active lifestyle because those in the countryside were continually in motion. However, the fact was that people living in villages were more spared despite low level of hygiene and living around animals. Smaller communities, closure in habitations and fresh air gave them simply a higher chance for outliving than in a crowded scruffy city³³. The rate of mortality, as it was in the case of Europe almost always indicated that weaker individuals were more prone to die than others. According to Zbigniew Kuchowicz, a healthfulness historian, adults could better endure the toils of everyday life, coping with the raging plague, and among children there was always natural selection³⁴. The meaning among the mentioned epidemics having an impact on contemporaneous people's odds, also had the plague of smallpox, decimating humanity through the following centuries that had been treated like a massive disease as it was the case with black death, typhoid or cholera. From 1980 it is treated as an illness combated thanks to standard vaccinations. The variola itself – variola nigra is a dangerous disease and distinguishes itself with high mortality, being a viral infectious illness and causing many complications³⁵. Formerly, it was present on the whole world and was considered right next to the black death as a huge pest in humanity's stories, being a cause for the biggest amount of fatal cases among all infectious diseases. For the first time information about it had been noted in Thucydides:

[...] the body in the time of the greatest severity of the disease did not languish but it exhibited among aches and pains an amazing immunity, insomuch that they predominantly died in the 7/9 day...³⁶

Its characteristic symptom, in addition to high fever, was a rash which soon covered the whole body and the interior of the oral cavity, even the upper gastrointestinal tract. However, depending on the disease's form, its course could be various – it could either be haemorrhagic or malignant. One could get

³³ B. Baranowski, *Kultura ludowa XVII–XVIII wieku na ziemiach Polski Środkowej*, Łódź 1971, p. 212.

³⁴ Z. Kuchowicz, *Leki i gusła dawnej wsi: stan zdrowotny polskiej wsi pańszczyźnianej w XVII–XVIII wieku*, Warsaw 1954, p. 97.

³⁵ Z. Gajda, *Historia medycyny dla każdego*, Warsaw 2021, p. 442.

³⁶ Thucydides, op.cit., p. 115.

infected mainly by a droplet route or by direct contact, even by dirty clothes or bedding³⁷. The best part was avoiding the sick people.

In that case, how was this disease inhibited? As we perfectly know, modern medicine is familiar to us thanks to records or treaties preserved in libraries or private collections; these were often innovative works acting as a kind of milestone in medicine. It was this epoch that distinguished itself with significant accomplishments, including those pertaining to the epidemic of smallpox. Namely in the 17th cent. the smallpox vaccination had been found out, which was initially used among wealthier social strata³⁸. A pioneer in this was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762) – as the first one she applied a prototype of vaccinations, that is variolation in Western Europe. During her travel to Ottoman Empire she spotted vaccinations of Constantinople's population, where a healthy person was given crusts or sanies grated to powder that had been drawn from patients with a mild course of pox. It is worth noting that there were different variations of pox. The benign version was obviously the least dangerous. The aim by a healthy person was a quick induction of the illness with a mild course, thanks to which the vaccinated individual gained an active immunity to this disease. Nevertheless, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu during this epidemic lost her brother, she also became ill. In 1718 under supervision of the doctor she "vaccinated" her son. After her return to the Great Britain, she continued vaccinations and, despite some complications, sometimes not much worse than the very disease, they were supposed to improve and finally did. Something had to be done with a disease, whose mortality fluctuated between 30–50%, and whose virus had been discovered not until the beginning of the 20th century³⁹. It cannot be forgotten that this illness killed perhaps all too soon personalities known to us from history – Mark Aurelius, Galen, Otto III or Louis XV. An interesting fact is that Queen Elisabeth I recovered from smallpox without problems, having in mind the reality of the past medicine. It is somewhat an achievement against the background of such high mortality in the modern era. As far back as in modern times and later the world had been attacked by consecutive epidemics. Cholera in the 19th century in Poland, jail fever, typhoid, later known to everybody as the Spanish flu (the twenties in the 20th cent.) which had affected a good bit larger amount of population than

³⁷ B. Różańska-Gambal, *Występowanie epidemii ospy prawdziwej na świecie od czasów starożytnych po współczesne*, „Medycyna Nowożytna. Studia nad Historią Medycyny” 2008, Vol. 15, No. 1–2, p. 32.

³⁸ J. Jeszke, *Historyk i lekarz jako badacze dziejów nauk medycznych*, „Medycyna Nowożytna. Studia nad Historią Medycyny” 1997, Vol. 4, No. 1–2, pp. 63–84.

³⁹ J. Komender (ed.), *Wielki słownik medycyny*, Kraków 1995, p. 940.

the I World War, Ebola, various alternations of influenza – swine flu, avian flu and AIDS. It is fair to draw conclusions summarizing those most dangerous epidemics for the humanity. Were the ways of treatment proper at all? The answer is simple – no. Any knowable in those times “medicaments” or attempts to cure the population of particular countries could, according to scholars, only delay the infection with a given disease, tweak the faint organism, unfortunately awaiting a wonder that had never happened. Observing our ancestors’ accomplishments, one may spot that many people tried to do fuga (escaping), especially when the morbidity was escalating or one had received proven information about the plague’s spectrum. Then people moved to safe places, very often to private homes of their close relatives or of their own⁴⁰. Many also had undergone quarantine (then it lasted 40 days). Additionally, rooms were aired, albeit avoiding flatus (mainly southern wind). People spent time outdoors, they were eating by using fumes medicaments were being taken, hands were being washed with vinegar (nowadays it is substituted with an alcohol-based liquid), generally people conformed to fluxus the deceased were being buried very quickly (far away from places of residence – the same case was done with people oppugnant to the Church), phlebotomia was carried out, and above all, people prayed fervently⁴¹. However, from where were individuals supposed to gain such information pertaining to the plague itself, bewareing of it and later forms of “treatment”? Most of all, in towns the upcoming danger was being stated by hanging different announcements on nearby boards in the town centre⁴². Later, very often such information was being passed by the clergy during masses and divine services, brochures were being passed to each other or leaflets were being printed⁴³. Moving about was being limited, as much as it was possible, people reported the sick ones or the decedents, places with a significant amount of people inside were being closed (taverns, shops churches – isn’t that so even today?) and even the town’s gates were being shut (today closing of the borders). Many individuals were excluded from environment – owing to the fact that there was no confidence that a disease could emerge from them – examples were poor men, prostitutes, witches⁴⁴.

So, what does it look like in the case of COVID-19? Did any improvement occur? As we know, currently our medicine is on a very high level, we can

⁴⁰ A. Karpiński (ed.), *Wśród córek...*, op.cit., p. 37.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

⁴² A. Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem...*, op.cit., p. 103.

⁴³ F.K. Kiple, op.cit., p 115.

⁴⁴ A. Karpiński, *W walce z niewidzialnym wrogiem...*, op.cit., p. 258.

avoid many circumstances, but the irony of fate is that we have a brush with an epidemic for which there is no cure.

COVID-19 is in fact a pandemic of an infectious disease caused by coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. Its beginning is dated presumably on November 17, 2019 in the city Wuhan, in the province of Hubei, in Middle China. Just a few months later, because on March 11, 2020 it was considered by WHO as a pandemic. COVID, primarily asymptomatic, of mild symptoms, yet has its lethal harvest in a dozen or so percents⁴⁵. The most significant risk of death and severe symptoms relates to people in their dotage, with comorbid diseases – cancer, hypertension and also diabetes⁴⁶. However, an infection with such virus does not have to end with contagion and disease. For a long time countries with significantly warmer climate than by us were having primacy in mortality – these were among others Italy. Dozens of thousands of infections and demises daily could be observed. However, by many of us, the virus had appeared asymptotically or it did not appear at all. This may indicate that perhaps there are individuals who are immune to this type of virus⁴⁷. Nevertheless, one undergoing of the infection does not give a complete confidence that we will never get sick again. This is the case with the usual seasonal flu and COVID-19, as well. As time goes by, the virus mutates and our immunization to the former virus mostly runs out together with the new season. Being sick of flu by an average person happens mostly twice at the turn of a year, yet this is not significant for contemporary people. The main aim is to clean our organism somehow and that none germs are necessary at all to this. However, only an adequately earned lifestyle may guarantee this – a great deal of physical activity and balanced diet⁴⁸. In that case, how to ward off an alleged pandemic COVID-19? Above all, we cannot panic in any way, because it is actually some type of flu, that did not appear for the first time in the world. Many were treated, many took medications, supporting the rapidly developing medicine.

However, the more effectively a society is treated for infectious diseases that are inherently mild and self-limiting, i.e. without the need for treatment, the more commonly it requires treatment for real, and

⁴⁵ World Health Organization, *Naming the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and the virus that causes it*, <https://covid-19.ebscomedical.com/who-naming-coronavirus-disease-covid-19-and-virus-causes-it> [access: 1.09.2020].

⁴⁶ *Stories of courage and determination. Wuhan in coronavirus lockdown*, Toruń 2020, p. 12.

⁴⁷ J. Słonecki, *Grypa – choroba prozdrowotna*, <https://portal.bioslone.pl/istota-chorob-infekcyjnych/grypa-choroba-prozdrowotna> [access: 10.09.2020].

⁴⁸ Idem, *Zdrowie na własne życzenie*, Vol. 1, Strzelce Opolskie 2014, p. 34.

therefore serious, diseases that are treated for life. What's more, any complications after infectious diseases, which are so common and, unfortunately, effectively scare off unconscious talk, are not the result of them, but the result of treatment⁴⁹.

How many "epidemics" were there so far and humanity was capable of coping with that malady? What is important is the common sense, adjusting to some degree to the scheduled rules (wearing of masks, disinfected hands, avoiding contact) and leading a relatively normal life. It is evident that we should talk about it all with others, try to read news in social media or watch TV systematically. Everything should be done in moderation. Nature is perfect and nothing should be corrected or changed.

[...] we strive to a reality, where the evil peeps in the faces that are exposed, stuck out openly to the view and the world. Outwardly there is nothing to hide, behind the mask of this superficial honesty there may be hidden an invisible death. The words flowing with the air yawned from bare mouth can contain real venom...⁵⁰

Also:

[...] being exposed, we are endangered, and, at the same time, dangerous [...] anymore the lipstick on lips or trimmed facial hair are the symbols of our personalities and statuses: it is the mask, that we can afford and which we went to the bother to find; it becomes our public avatar...⁵¹

The COVID-19 pandemic, considered as an omnipresent health crisis of the 21st century, is not the first one and will not be the last plague of this type. The balance sheet of the ill or the deceased at the end of its duration will not be as grand as we are able to forecast.

Both during it and many other, earlier epidemics – patients died, having previously struggled with their own shaky breath for many hours, and sometimes even days. Finally we have fought many viruses, here it will be the same. This is a matter of time⁵².

⁴⁹ Idem, *Grypa...*, op.cit.

⁵⁰ J. Miller, *The Coronavirus. Human, Social and Political Implications*, Singapore 2020, pp. 8–20.

⁵¹ Ibidem.

⁵² P. Giordano, *W czasach epidemii*, Katowice 2020, p. 27.

Conclusion

As it has been stated, the plagues have many times influenced the fortunes of the contemporary world. We have to acknowledge that coronavirus COVID-19 will stay with us for some period of time, and eventually will not be more dangerous than a regular seasonal flu. After all, we are aware of the fact that this “seasonal” flu beds each year thousands of people down and repeatedly reaps its lethal harvest, which is much more generous than coronavirus (yet it is not mentioned as such in social media and television). Then many people are addicted to buying drugs to feel safe thanks to the drugs. Doctors know that a healthy society is a brake on the development of medicine and they prescribe many drugs to keep patients. Of course, medications are not always effective, and many diseases are entirely absent. As is the case with the mentioned COVID-19.

In the case of COVID-19 there exists a possibility that it will yet stay with us for long years, supposing not for, so we should start to live with it. The best solution for us would simply be to get sick and just endure the infection in order to become naturally immune to it. In other words, the slogan patient, known to all of us, is defined as a unique species of human who, thanks to the indoctrination of medical propaganda, has become a passive buyer of medicines and medical services, will become very accurate. He [the patient] appeared in the early twenty-first century as a safeguard against the shortage of patients that threatened to bankrupt the pharmaceutical and medical cartel, so breeding this species has become a priority in modern medicine. This is also the case today. As it is in the case of Polish people, being surprisingly more immune to complications after the coronavirus, than the rest of the world, one may observe that some factors are concur to it. Of course, many died and will be dying because of the complications yet this is just a drop in the ocean of deceased people pertaining mainly to the increased risk group. The truth is that those individuals are the most subject to not only complications connected with COVID-19 but also to complications pertaining to a regular flu. The victims had always been and will always be. In this case nothing will change. It is sad but true. But, for whom? Certainly not for those who need such patients. More ill patients. No moral principles. No humanity.

In order not to let such amount of demises which had been in the course of our history but even nowadays, in most countries affected by coronavirus it is worth supplying nations with an appropriate amount of beds in hospitals, which would be dedicated to those patients and also a skilled medical staff.

This way we will overcome the epidemic, trying to have a reasonably normal life, without an exaggerated concern about our health. For this what is happening nowadays, cannot be strictly termed a plague or catastrophe. It is not something new in humanity's history. They were visible earlier in the past, they are currently and will still victimize future generations. So let us be healthy. Let us live wisely. Let us not be a passive buyer of medicines and medical services. Let us take care of ourselves and our loved ones. We will only survive this way. As he said doctor Józef Słonecki – with health, as with everything – as you care, so do you have⁵³.

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⁵³ J. Słonecki, *Grypa...*, op.cit.

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Antonine Plague, Black Death and Smallpox Epidemic versus COVID-19. How Did Humankind Cope with the Grapple Against the Biggest Epidemics, and What Does it Look Like Today?

Summary

This article is devoted to the problems that prevail in times from antiquity to the present day. The specter of an epidemic, known to humankind since the dawn of time, was a negative phenomenon, destabilizing contemporary life and having a significant impact on biological, social, economic and cultural aspects. It was impossible to protect against the epidemic – until the 19th century, medicine did much more damage than we might imagine. Doctors were powerless against diseases, they healed as much as they could, unable to overcome the specter of the coming plague. Is not that also the case today? COVID-19 is not much different from the "epidemics" that hit our country in previous centuries. Both in the past and today, there is no cure for the disease that prevails today, only to treat its external symptoms. The juxtaposition of some of the largest in the history of the world right now, and comparing them to the COVID-19 raging since autumn 2019 shows us that with the medicine of that time, we are not threatened with such depopulation of the world as it used to be ... to our heritage, look at the works on the plagues to learn from them for the future. The article cites historical and

literary sources, as well as older or newer studies, showing how much evil epidemics once caused, how people tried to protect against them, and if the threat appeared in their area, how it was fought.

Keywords: epidemic, black death, COVID-19, medicine, disease

Антонинова чума, черная смерть и эпидемия оспы в сравнении с Covid-19. Как человечество справилось с борьбой с величайшими эпидемиями и как это выглядит сегодня?

Резюме

Эта статья посвящена проблемам, преобладающим во времена от античности до наших дней. Призрак эпидемии, известный человечеству с незапамятных времен, является негативным явлением, дестабилизирующим современную жизнь и оказывающим огромное влияние на биологические, социальные, экономические и культурные аспекты. Защититься от эпидемии было невозможно – до 19 века медицина наносила гораздо больший ущерб, чем мы могли себе представить. Врачи были бессильны против болезней, они исцеляли, сколько могли, неспособные преодолеть призрак надвигающейся чумы. Разве это не так и сегодня? Covid-19 мало чем отличается от «эпидемий», поразивших нашу страну в предыдущие века. И в прошлом, и сегодня нет лекарства от болезни, которая преобладает сегодня, только для лечения ее внешних симптомов. Сопоставление некоторых из крупнейших в истории мира эпидемий и сравнение их с бушующим с осени 2019 года коронавирусом COVID-19 показывает нам, что с медициной того времени нам не грозит такая депопуляция мира, как раньше. В статье цитируются исторические и литературные источники, а также более старые или новые исследования, показывающие, сколько зловещных эпидемий когда-то вызвали, как люди пытались от них защититься, и если угроза появилась в их районе, как с ней бороться.

Ключевые слова: эпидемия, черная смерть, covid, медицина, болезнь