

Background information:

The Black Death was a great plague, or pestilence, which spread across Europe in the 14th century. It was first reported in Spain, Constantinople, and other parts of Southern Europe in 1347, and had spread to London by 1349.

The Black Death was actually three types of plague, the most famous is the ‘bubonic plague’, however the ‘pneumonic plague’ was also widespread, and often even more deadly. Finally, these plagues could get even worse and develop into the ‘septicaemic plague’, which was always fatal. The Black Death was extremely dangerous, and eventually killed a third of Europe’s population. It is estimated to have killed up to half of London’s population.

Source A

‘In the end, the plague killed a large number of people. Scarcely a tenth of the population survived. It was also noticed that everyone born after the plague had two fewer teeth than people had before. The next year, 1350, was a year devoted to repenting. But it is surprising how quickly people forget the anger of God. It was because of the sins of men, or so it was believed, that God allowed the human race to be so badly destroyed by the plague that there were hardly enough survivors to bury the bodies. But people still did not turn away from their terrible crimes.’

An extract from the writings of John of Reading, a monk who lived through the Black Death

Source B

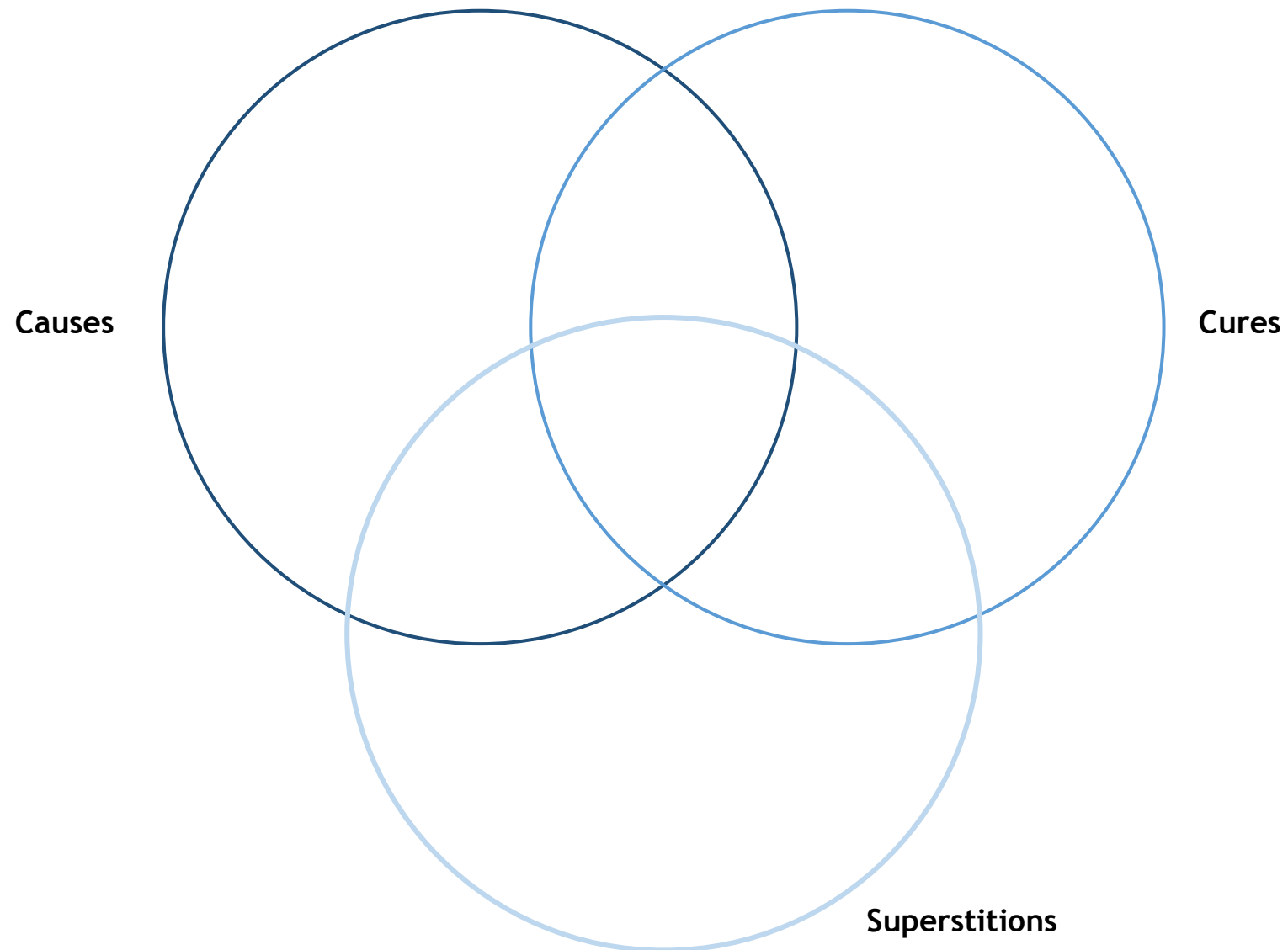
‘The pestilence can arise from a range of sources. In some cases the pestilence may come from the rotting flesh of the dead, in others it may lie in the sin of the afflicted. At one time it might be bad water which lies still and stinking, or at other times the evil passage of a witched beast. This evil pestilence flies on the air and lurks in the blood – when even the most knowledgeable of doctors cannot treat us, we have only God to rely upon.’

A letter from a Nottingham-based merchant to his business partner in London, October 1348

Tasks

1. Read the background information. Highlight or annotate the key terms and dates in this information.
2. Read through the cards on pp.3-4. Using the letters (A-M) sort the information into three groups on the Venn diagram on p.2: causes, cures, and superstitions. Remember some cards may fit into multiple groups.
3. Read sources A and B. Use these to rank the importance of each card within your three categories (causes, cures, and superstitions). Which do you think most people believed, and which had the most effect?
4. Using all of the information you have learned, and referring to direct evidence from sources A and B, explain why the Black Death was so destructive, and why medieval doctors struggled to cure it.
5. **Challenge:** Consider all of the information from this lesson. What does it suggest about the quality of medical knowledge in the Middle Ages?

Venn diagram



Card sort

<p>A. The bubonic plague was spread by fleas which carried the three plagues. These fleas predominantly lived on rats.</p>	<p>B. Some communities began burning the clothes and bodies of those who had died of the plague. They did this to get rid of traces of the plague and this would also have killed the bacteria.</p>
<p>C. There was a long-standing theory called the 'theory of the four humours', which was largely incorrect but had some scientific basis. In the Middle Ages this was often combined with superstitious astrology (star signs and planet movement).</p>	<p>D. The Black Death was so contagious, especially the bubonic plague, that it could be passed from the fleas on or around dead bodies, infected people's clothes, and even if people shared bedding.</p>
<p>E. Some doctors believed that eating a spoonful of crushed emeralds would get rid of the plague – this was perhaps the most expensive (and entirely made-up) treatment available!</p>	<p>F. The Black Death terrified medieval people. They did not know what caused it, nor where it had come from. This led to a great deal of superstitions surrounding the plague.</p>
<p>G. The septicaemic plague was very rarely contagious – it would develop if someone had a particularly bad case of the bubonic plague which poisoned their bloodstream.</p>	<p>H. Doctors did not know about germs (this knowledge was not discovered until the 19th century). This meant they did not understand about infection, cleanliness, or contagion.</p>
<p>I. Some believed that rubbing a plucked chicken onto one's plague boils was a cure. Sometimes the chicken was still alive!</p>	<p>J. Pomander was a French herb often used in attempted aromatherapy for the plague, either eating it or breathing in its smoke.</p>
<p>K. Leeches have been used throughout history as a way to clean one's blood, and this was also used for the plague.</p>	<p>L. When people were covered in plague boils, they believed that washing in urine would help get rid of the boils, and make them better.</p>

<p>M. Some communities realised that fleas might be involved, and as such became suspicious of all animals. This led to a great anger against animals, especially cats (and particularly black cats).</p>	<p>N. The pneumonic plague was airborne – it was spread from one infected person to another, often through coughs, sneezes, and poor personal hygiene.</p>
<p>O. One theory, the ‘theory of miasma’, said that bad smells caused disease, but even worse smells would block it! Therefore, some people believed that going to live in the sewers would block the plague!</p>	<p>P. Religion was extremely important in the Middle Ages, and attempts to get better frequently relied upon this. Methods included praying, burning large candles, and ‘flagellation’ – whipping oneself whilst walking through town, praying loudly and publicly.</p>
<p>Q. The Black Death is believed to have started in China. It is not known for sure how the Black Death made its way to Europe, but the most common theory is that rats on trading ships came into the great trading harbours of Constantinople, Lisbon, and Venice.</p>	<p>R. Some people believed that the Black Death was actually caused by a group of Jews across Europe who were poisoning wells and other water supplies. This is just one example of Jews being ‘scapegoated’ in European history.</p>

