



TUBERCULOSIS AND THE SANATORIUM AGE

In 1900, tuberculosis was the number one killer disease in the world. Often called “consumption” or “wasting disease,” its symptoms include dramatic weight loss, fatigue, fever, loss of appetite and a constant, persistent cough. It is an infectious disease that is passed through microscopic droplets infected with the *Mycrobacterium tuberculosis* bacillus that are released into the air. This can happen when someone with untreated TB coughs, spits, or sneezes. The cause of tuberculosis was not identified until 1882. As the discovery of effective antibiotics that could cure the disease was still some 60 years in the future, doctors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries attempted many “cures.”

Doctors associated TB with physiological characteristics such as age and weight. By 1900 the most prevalent prescription for TB involved rest, fresh air and a healthy diet. As a result, a new industry emerged to provide TB treatment and the “Sanatorium Age” was born.

In 1885, Edward Trudeau built the first TB sanatorium in the United States dedicated to curing TB through fresh air and good nutrition at Lake Saranac, New York. Others emerged rapidly all along the East Coast. Because of the emphasis on fresh air, the Trans-Mississippi West became a hopeful destination for TB victims. Western states advertised that their clean mountain or desert air was superior to any Eastern location. By 1900, one-fourth of migrants to California and one-third of migrants to Colorado were TB victims.

Regardless of the location, the philosophy of treatment for TB was relatively simple; provide good food, lots of fresh air (even in the winter in the mountains) and plenty of inactivity. Patients were required to lie in bed day and night with very little to do. Because these “cures” included no clinical treatment to kill the tuberculosis bacteria, they did little good.

Medical historians believe that most TB victims who recovered benefitted most from isolation and a better diet. Cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were not healthy places. Most people lived in cramped and crowded conditions that promoted the spread of disease. Among most unskilled workers, diets were poor and lacked the nutrient proteins to bolster the immune system. City air, filled with coal smoke from factories and furnaces, compromised the respiratory systems of urban dwellers. Isolation, clean air and improved nutrition helped those in the early stages of the disease. It was these few who survived.

The “Sanatorium Age” reached its peak in the twenty years between the World Wars. The discovery and availability of antibiotics after World War II began the decline of TB in the United States. By the 1960s, most sanatoriums had closed or had converted to other uses.