



TUBERCULOSIS AND THE SANATORIUM AGE

In 1900, tuberculosis (TB) was the number one killer disease in the world. It was often called “consumption” or “wasting disease.” Its symptoms are dramatic weight loss, fatigue, fever, loss of appetite and a constant cough. It is an infectious disease that is passed when someone with untreated TB coughs, spits, or sneezes. This releases infected microscopic droplets into the air. The cause of tuberculosis was not identified until 1882. The cure for TB would be antibiotics. They would not be discovered until the 1930s. Until then, doctors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries attempted many “cures.”

Doctors related TB to physiological characteristics such as age and weight. In 1900 the prescription for TB called for rest, fresh air and a healthy diet. As a result, a new industry emerged to provide TB treatment. The “Sanatorium Age” was born.

In 1885, Edward Trudeau built the first TB sanatorium in the United States at Lake Saranac, New York. Because of the emphasis on fresh air, the West became a popular destination for TB victims. Western states advertised their clean mountain or desert air as a cure for TB. Desperate “lungers,” as TB victims were called, rushed to the West to try to recover. By 1900, one-fourth of migrants to California and one-third of migrants to Colorado were TB victims hoping to be cured in a healthy, dry climate.

The sanatorium treatment for TB was relatively simple; provide good food, lots of fresh air (even in the winter in the mountains) and plenty of inactivity. Sanatorium patients ate four or five times a day. Their diet consisted of meat, eggs and whole grains. Patients had to lie in bed day and night with very little to do. These “cures” did not include any clinical treatment to kill the tuberculosis bacteria. These “cures” 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. Diets were poor and lacked the necessary proteins to build-up the immune system. City air was filled with coal smoke from factories and furnaces. It 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 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.