

REVOLUTIONARY MEDICINE

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



THE FOUNDING FATHERS AND
MOTHERS IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

REVOLUTIONARY MEDICINE

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Before the advent of modern antibiotics, one's life could be abruptly shattered by contagion and death, and debility from infectious diseases and epidemics was commonplace for early Americans, regardless of social status. Concerns over health affected the founding fathers and mothers and their families as it did slaves, merchants, immigrants, and all inhabitants of North America in the colonial and early republic eras. As both victims of illness and national leaders, the Founders occupied a unique position regarding the development of public health in America. *Revolutionary Medicine* refocuses the study of the lives of George and Martha Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John and Abigail Adams, and James and Dolley Madison away from the usual lens of politics to the unique perspective of sickness, health, and medicine in their era.

For the founders, republican ideals fostered a reciprocal connection between individual health and the "health" of the nation. Studying the encounters of these American founders with illness and disease, as well as their viewpoints about good health, not only provides us with a richer and more nuanced insight into their lives, but also opens a window into the practice of medicine in the eighteenth century, which is at once intimate, personal, and first-hand. Moreover America's founders recognized early on that government had compelling reasons to shoulder some new responsibilities with respect to ensuring the health and well-being of its citizenry. The state of medicine and public healthcare today is still a work in progress, but these founders played a significant role in beginning the conversation that shaped the contours of its development.

314 PAGES

PAPER • 978-1-4798-8057-7

HEALTH AND MEDICINE IN THE ERA OF AMERICA'S FOUNDERS

SUMMARY

This introduction sets the stage for an examination of the American founders highlighted in the book against the backdrop of eighteenth century American medicine. These founders include George and Martha Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John and Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James and Dolley Madison. It also provides descriptions of the many illnesses and diseases they confronted and the remedies available at the time. Focusing a lens on the founders' often dramatic encounters with epidemics and illness and the medical treatments of their time lends them a corporeal presence that is absent from most historical accounts and serves to humanize them as flesh and blood individuals.

Disease was prevalent and often catastrophic in early America and medicine had not developed far from theories and treatments first espoused by Galen in the second century, which emphasized the balance of four bodily humors — yellow and black bile, blood, and phlegm. Most early American physicians relied on bloodletting along with other invasive measures to fight virtually all illnesses in an attempt to restore health. Dr. Benjamin Rush, the leading American physician at the time, is also profiled in this chapter to illuminate the state of medical practice during the era. The founders' regular encounters with personal illness and the specter of epidemics and plagues that could and did devastate entire communities made political leaders like Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison acutely sensitive to health issues and encouraged them to take significant steps to improve not only their health and that of their families but the wider health of the nation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What were the most common diseases in America during the colonial and early Republic eras?
- What types of medical treatments characterized early American medicine?
- What were some of the many ways in which epidemics regularly affected the lives of early Americans?
- Who was Dr. Benjamin Rush and in what way did he evidence innovative medical outlooks as well as treatments which were clearly ineffective?
- How did the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic of 1793 reflect the state of contemporary medical knowledge?
- In what ways did smallpox prevention illuminate the evolving nature of medical progress?
- What are some examples of the ways that some of America's founders influenced public health?

GEORGE AND MARTHA WASHINGTON: HEALTH, ILLNESS, AND THE FIRST FAMILY

SUMMARY

This chapter traces the lives of George and Martha Washington through the prism of health and illness. Martha's story reflects the high mortality rate of the era, particularly among infants and young children. Tragically, she lost all four of her children to disease. George battled a number of serious, life threatening illnesses, and as a prominent plantation owner became familiar with the symptoms and treatment of many illnesses. As commander of the Revolutionary Army, Washington's emphasis on cleanliness and sanitation among his troops and his insistence that they be inoculated against smallpox represented forward looking public health measures. They were his most important contributions to American medicine.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What were the illnesses that affected Martha Custis Washington's children, and how did they reflect the common ailments of the time?
- What types of medicines and tonics did Washington keep at Mt. Vernon to treat his family and slaves?
- How did smallpox inoculation among Washington's troops affect the outcome of the American Revolution?
- In what ways did the 1793 Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic affect the fledgling American government?
- What caused Washington's death and could it have been prevented through modern medicine?

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN: A FOUNDING FATHER OF AMERICAN MEDICINE

SUMMARY

This chapter focuses on Franklin's central role in the development of American medicine. Although Franklin is best known as a leading revolutionary leader and statesman, innovative scientist, and skillful diplomat, Franklin also developed important ideas on disease prevention and health care. He was a key figure in the founding of the Pennsylvania public charitable hospital in 1752 and the Academy and College of Philadelphia, the forerunner of the University of Pennsylvania. It was there that Franklin helped establish America's first medical school in 1765. Franklin also used his creative mind to develop common health aids, such as bifocal glasses, and he was an influential advocate for widespread smallpox inoculation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What factors influenced Franklin to support smallpox inoculation, and what practical steps did he take to make inoculation more widespread in early America?
- What scientific inventions, experiments, and procedures did Franklin introduce that helped improve American medicine?
- What forward-thinking theories did Franklin develop about preventive health measures including diet, exercise, fresh air, and sleeping patterns?
- Given Franklin's generally progressive medical views, why might Franklin have adhered to the longstanding medical practice of venesection (bloodletting) and other radical therapies?
- How did Franklin help disseminate medical information to the American public?
- Did Franklin understand germ theory?
- Franklin earned the sobriquet "Dr. Franklin." What factors made him a respected figure in the world of medicine during his day?

ABIGAIL AND JOHN ADAMS: PARTNERS IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

SUMMARY

This chapter examines the lives of Abigail and John Adams and provides us with a first-hand account of how disease affected early New England residents on a regular basis. John and Abigail Adams became leading figures in the American Revolution and the new republic, but their letters also serve as vivid primary sources about many common health challenges of their day. John's often humorous description of his own smallpox inoculation in 1764 provides us with one of the most detailed accounts historians have of the procedure. John and Abigail outlived four of their six children. Their experiences with epidemics before the era of vaccination for common childhood diseases such as mumps, measles, whooping cough, and a variety of viruses and bacterial infections that affected adults and children alike demonstrate what a devastating impact illnesses had on entire communities. Like many early American political leaders, John Adams also understood that disease not only affected families but could disrupt commerce and political life as well. As president, he signed the Seaman's Act in 1798, which provided health aid to ill seamen, who often brought disease into the country. It gave rise to a network of hospitals located at sea and river ports across the United States, and slowly over the next century it evolved into the national American Public Health Service.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Based on John Adams's account, how did physicians prepare patients for smallpox inoculation and how was the procedure conducted?
- During John's residence in Philadelphia as a delegate to the Continental Congress, Abigail remained in Quincy to oversee their farm and take care of the children. How did Abigail cope with rampant epidemics such as dysentery, measles, and smallpox, which all affected her immediate family?
- During one of John's absences, Abigail gave birth to a stillborn baby girl. How did this tragic event reflect childbirth practices at the time? How did both Abigail and John deal with the loss of yet another child?
- What was John Adams's view about the threat of smallpox to the success of the Continental Army?
- Like many early American women, Abigail Adams often assisted in neighborhood births and treated her family members with home remedies or advice based on popular self-help manuals. In what ways did early American women often act as medical "practitioners?"
- How did John Adams and other founders view the connection between the good health of individual citizens and the well-being of the new nation?

THOMAS JEFFERSON: ADVOCATE FOR HEALTHY LIVING

SUMMARY

Although Jefferson regarded politics as his “duty,” he reserved his passion for science and viewed the study of medicine as one of its most important branches. Influenced by progressive French medicine, Jefferson was often critical of contemporary American invasive health measures such as bloodletting and frequently criticized physicians who he felt often placed theory above empiric evidence. Like his revolutionary contemporary and hero Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson was a staunch believer in the benefits of exercise, fresh air, a sensible diet which emphasized fruits and vegetables, and temperate eating and drinking. He also kept abreast of medical issues. The tragic early death of so many of Jefferson’s loved ones, including his young wife Martha and five of their six children, made Jefferson especially sensitive to the need for improvements in public health and medicine in early America.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Jefferson once stated “I am born to lose everything I love.” How did the loss of so many of his family members impact his interest in medicine and reflect the high mortality rates of his time?
- What were some of the specific health challenges Jefferson himself faced?
- During Jefferson’s residence in Paris as the American envoy to France, he was introduced to several prominent French physicians, including Dr. Cabanis. How did French medicine influence Jefferson’s outlook on medical treatment?
- What were Jefferson’s views on the therapeutic power of nature and the best measures for healthy living?
- What types of medicinal plants did Jefferson cultivate at his Monticello plantation?
- Jefferson was living in Philadelphia during the 1793 yellow fever epidemic. What information did his first-hand reports convey, and in what manner do they reflect his keen understanding of the era of the scientific method and the nature of disease?

THOMAS JEFFERSON: THE HEALTH OF THE NATION

SUMMARY

Jefferson's Enlightenment outlook on human progress and the belief that science should contribute to the advancement of human welfare influenced his role as an early leader in the field of American public health. He viewed the health of the body and the health of society as intertwined. As president, Thomas Jefferson used his considerable influence to advance American medicine and foster good health, most notably in his strong support of the newer, safer Jenner method of smallpox vaccination and his directive that the Lewis and Clark expedition gather information about Indian diseases and treatments as part of its mission. After his retirement, as the "father" of the University of Virginia, Jefferson worked towards making advanced medical education available at the school as well as providing educated laymen with a good understanding of medicine.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What were the advantages that the Jenner smallpox vaccination held over the earlier inoculation method?
- In what ways did Jefferson play a pivotal role in encouraging smallpox vaccination throughout the nation among people of all classes?
- How did Jefferson serve at times as a medical practitioner himself?
- What was Jefferson's relationship with the physicians of his era?
- What was Jefferson's underlying medical philosophy?
- What specific measures did Jefferson introduce at the University of Virginia to foster good health and provide medical students with the most up to date medical information?

EVOLUTIONARY MEDICINE

SUMMARY

Not only were America's founders political actors on the stage of the eighteenth-century world, but on multiple levels they contributed to advancements in American medicine. In particular, Washington, Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison used their positions to influence public health and disseminate knowledge about better health practices to their families, communities, and citizens in the nation at large. The revolutionary generation was profoundly influenced by Enlightenment thought and the role of reason and science, including medicine, in promoting well-being and happiness. Although their sometimes utopian vision of a future in which Franklin declared would be a time when "All Diseases may by sure means be prevented" did not come to pass, gradually medical progress became a reality. The founders raised questions about responsibility for the sick and indigent and the relationship of individuals and government that command our attention to this day.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- In what ways were the founders influenced by Enlightenment era philosophy, and how did it affect their outlooks on health, illness and medicine?
- Do you feel that the eighteenth century reflected the dawn of modern medicine?
- What were some of the public health measures the founders helped initiate?
- What role might government have in raising health care standards in America?
- What early medical treatments have regained popularity today?
- What were some of the successful therapeutic medical interventions of the eighteenth century?
- How might better individual health contribute to wider economic prosperity and social growth?
- In what ways did some of the founders demonstrate an interest in a more holistic approach to medicine?