



**The Exeter College Summer Programme  
at Exeter College in the University of Oxford**

**Medicine and Disease in European History**

**Course Description**

What is disease? And why has our understanding and our experience of it changed so radically? Why did most people turn to priests, rather than doctors, during the Black Death? Why did a completely erroneous theory of cholera transmission inspire the most sweeping socio-political revolution in London's history? Why has cancer proved so intractable in the face of a multi-billion-pound research onslaught?

Many have argued that the answers to these questions can be found in the powerful knowledge claims of twenty-first-century biomedical science. Simply subject historical cases to the authoritative modern clinical gaze, they say, and you will learn everything about them you might want to know. But why should we be so confident that this kind of 'retrospective diagnosis' offers the last word on the complex landscape of health and disease? Can modern biomedicine really help us to understand the experiences of people who thought about illness and the body in very different ways? Should we concentrate on the impressive achievements of doctors, scientists and surgeons, tracing a line from ancient ignorance to modern knowledge? Or should we try to write medical history from below, highlighting patients' perspectives and setting older ideas of disease in their wider cultural context?

To answer these questions we'll trace the interplay of scientific, clinical, social, religious and moral judgements invested in 'framing' a disease, and how these 'frames' have developed in different times and places. We'll also consider the ways in which race, gender and sexuality have each been framed in pathological terms, and how these framings have been challenged. Whether you're a doctor or a patient, a scholar or a citizen, this course will give you new and challenging ways to think about these questions.

Through 12 lectures, 6 seminars, 4 tutorials and required reading students will gain a fuller understanding of the strikingly different ways in which Western people have thought about their bodies, in sickness and in health, over the past four hundred years. The course will help you to hone your analytical skills, deepen your abilities in textual analysis, improve your confidence in academic debate, and develop your presentation skills. It will also give you a chance to write clearly and concisely about complex cultural and historical events, in the form of extended essays and examination answers.

The course is designed to be multidisciplinary and is suitable for students of all disciplines who have a strong interest in history. Those with an interest in crossing disciplinary boundaries between the sciences and humanities may find this material particularly stimulating.

There are no prerequisites, and no previous knowledge of history is necessary, but some knowledge of historical methodology and/or Western history in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries would be an advantage.

### **Teaching Methods and Assessment**

- 12 x 1.25hr Lectures (15hrs)
- 6 x 1.25hr Seminars (7.5hrs)
- 4 x 1.25hr Tutorials (5hrs)

Twice weekly lectures will present the key phases of the topic under study in their specificity and their relationship to the central concerns of the course. Students will be expected to have completed the readings before the relevant lecture. A weekly seminar will focus in-depth study of lecture themes and provide opportunities for further discussion and to ask questions. In addition, students will be expected to give a short oral presentation on the framing of a disease in modern life.

**Final assessment:** An essay of no more than 3,000 words (40%), a final three-hour written examination (40%), oral presentation (10%) and participation in seminar discussion (10%).

### **Lecture Schedule**

1. Introduction: How to do the History of Disease
2. Framing Disease in Action: The Black Death and the Great Plague of London
3. Bodies and Organs: Disease in the Hospital
4. Microscopes and Cells: Disease in the Laboratory
5. Disease and the State 1: Cholera
6. Medicine and Imperialism: Malaria
7. Disease and the State 2: The NHS
8. Molecularising Race: Sickle Cell Anaemia
9. Bodies and Behaviours 1: Homosexuality
10. Bodies and Behaviours 2: Anorexia Nervosa
11. Postmodern Anxieties 1: AIDS
12. Postmodern Anxieties 2: Cancer

### **Reading List**

Suggested pre-arrival reading

- Richard Barnett, *The Sick Rose: Disease And The Art Of Medical Illustration*, Thames & Hudson, 2014.
- Harry Collins & Trevor Pinch, *The Golem: What You Should Know About Science*, second edition, Cambridge University Press, 2012
- Roy Porter, *Bodies Politic: Disease, Death And Doctors In Britain, 1650-1900*, Cornell University Press, 2001.

Roger Cooter & John Pickstone (eds), *Routledge Companion To Medicine In The Twentieth Century*, Routledge, 2003.

Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Mark Harrison, *Disease And The Modern World: 1500 To The Present Day*, Polity Press, 2004.