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Emotional epidemiology: Using disease histories to reconsider pathogen avoidance theory

For the past two decades there have been various theses and antitheses regarding the idea that the disgust reaction evolved to support pathogen avoidance. Pathogen avoidance theory maintains that human self-preservation is dependent on avoiding, sublimating or destroying microbes. At first glance, disgust would appear to be a spontaneous and immediate reaction to a perceived threat. Yet it is also learned over time, and can even be unlearned, in that it is possible to challenge an understanding of what is disgusting. This paper will use examples from the shift in response to uncertainty in medical knowledge during the first outbreak of plague in Sydney as well as turn of the century tuberculosis prevention, as an evidence base to argue that disgust has a kind of plasticity that has been mobilised to change practices following the development of new epidemiological knowledge. While disgust may protect people from actual toxicity, it is also adapted to distance us from an array of perceived threats, many of which are not pathogenic and can be operationalised to regulate behaviour. This paper uses examples from medical history to intervene in this debate, arguing that disgust is not an intrinsic form of pathogen avoidance but is endlessly shaped by culture and epistemological change.