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Advances in bacteriology amid oceans of lung complaints: The persistence of ideas about the restorative power of sea voyages and fresh air

European breakthroughs in bacteriology in the late 1800s and early 1900s promised cures for dread diseases affecting the lungs like tuberculosis. At the same time, beliefs strengthened around the world in the health-giving benefits of ocean voyages and of holidays in wilderness areas, lake districts and by the sea. These beliefs had numerous cultural impacts including the spread of spas, sanatoria and national parks and, in some cases, migration to countries credited with having clean air.

Drawing on the correspondence of colonial immigration agents, government officials and settlers in Australia and New Zealand, this paper examines the power and paradox of health benefits attributed to exposing the lungs to clean air.

While effective medicaments for lung diseases took decades longer to materialise than initially projected, ideas about an antipodean existence where ‘the lungs play freely, and no difficulty is felt in breathing’ gained space and time to adapt and endure.