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PUBLIC HEALTH

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Chapter 4

Sanitation to education: 1800–1900s

A key period for public health came with the rise of the 'modern state' in the 19th century. Rapid economic growth and mass urbanization coincided with high mortality from infectious diseases such as cholera and typhus. Increases in life expectancy in the late 18th century juddered to a halt until the 1870s because of unhealthy urban environments. The definition and compass of public health at this time was about drains and sanitation, cleansing the environment as a whole. But this focus for public health changed during the century. Scientific breakthroughs in the 1860s, when the French chemist Louis Pasteur formulated germ theory, brought vaccines and pharmacotherapy for specific diseases. The environmental emphasis of 19th-century public health gave way to a greater focus on the individual, to education and personal advice, and to a concern for the health of mothers and babies in the home. This chapter will examine this period of challenge for public health and also the changing rationale of public health itself. The century was framed by issues which continue to mark public health.

Patterns of life expectancy

Britain was the world's first industrial nation and so initially the emphasis will be on what happened there.