

STS.005: Disease and Society in America  
Fourth Paper Assignment

Disease and Individual Responsibility

Due at start of Lecture: 13 December 2005

Societies often respond to disease by holding individuals responsible for the diseases that afflict them. This occurs both with explanations of disease and with responses to disease, during dramatic epidemics and in the routine ailments of everyday life. Throughout the course we have seen countless examples. Virgin soil theorists blamed Indian epidemics on deficiencies of Indian immune systems. Timothy Flint urged settlers to take care as they exposed themselves to exotic environments. Health officials in San Francisco in 1900 blamed plague on Chinese residents and quarantined Chinatown to contain the epidemic. Most recently, HIV, tobacco, and obesity have all fueled controversies about individual responsibilities, rights, and obligations.

Drawing on what you have learned in this course, write a 2000-word (6-8 page) essay that answers the following two sets of questions:

- First, in what ways are individuals responsible for the diseases that afflict them? Does the level of responsibility differ between different diseases? Does the way in which a disease is acquired (e.g. genetic, environmental, contagious, etc.) matter in determining responsibility? Is it possible to develop a just and appropriate method for assigning responsibility in any given illness episode?
- Second, should responsibility have consequences? Should the level of an individual's responsibility for an illness determine how that illness is managed? Consider everything from coercive measures (e.g. quarantine), to assigning priority for treatment, determining cost of treatment, and deciding who pays for treatment. If responsibility carries consequences, does that simply justify new forms of discrimination? Is it possible to distinguish between appropriate consequences and punitive stigmatization?

As you formulate your answers, follow these guidelines.

- Your answers to these questions must include clear and specific arguments.
- Defend your arguments with specific examples drawn from the history of medicine. You must discuss at least three different diseases. You must draw on material from at least two different centuries.
- You must use material from at least three (and preferably more) of the readings from this course. Many have obvious relevance, including: Crosby, Jones, Flint, Valencius, Pernick, Rosenberg, Marmot, Wilkinson, Ulrich, Blake, Buchan, Starr, Clarke, Jackson, Jones, Brandt, "Discussion on the Advisability of the Registration of Tuberculosis," Leavitt, Treichler, Specter, Jones & Brandt, and Brandt. Be sure to distinguish between primary and secondary sources and to use each appropriately.
- Your essays must be well organized and clearly written.
- You must cite all sources (course readings, lectures, other readings if any) correctly; this includes both the source and the specific page number. If you have any questions, see the information at the MIT Writing Center website (<http://web.mit.edu/writing/>). You can pick your own style (e.g. CMS, parenthetical citations, etc.) -- just be accurate, consistent, complete.
- Please put your name on a title page, but not on any pages of the body of the paper, so that we may grade the papers blind.