The Effects of the 14th-Century Plague on Medieval European Society and Parallels in the 2014 Ebola Outbreak

Abstract
Disease represents a strong driving force of societal and cultural change, which remains consistent over time. During the 14th century, the Plague ravaged Europe, and fear of illness, destruction, and hopelessness altered society. The religious climate of the entire continent drove many to commit acts of violence. The way medicine was taught and practiced moved more towards modern medicine. Government began to take a more active role in the health of the citizens, and national legislation began having greater impacts at the local level. The centuries old economic structure began to crumble, setting the stage for more balanced, free-market trade. Those factors—mentality, medicine, law, and economics—elicited similar reactions in the 2014 Ebola Outbreak. Fear of Ebola resulted in Medical researchers were inspired by the outbreak to learn more about Ebola and are looking for potential cures and vaccines. Laws restricting travel and advocating healthy practices dominated the infected countries. The economies of the diseased areas suffered. Little has changed between the nature of people in medieval Europe and today. Though centuries have passed, societies respond to disease in the same fundamental ways.

Thesis
When a disease rapidly infects large numbers of people, it leaves its mark on society in a large number of ways. The effects that a disease engrains into a society may happen quickly or take many years to reach fruition. Some effects may be confined to the time a disease runs its course, and others may have consequences for years or even centuries later.

Upon study of historical research and current event reports, it appears that there are still striking parallels between 1340’s Europe and the modern world in the way people respond to the mass outbreak of a deadly illness. The impacts the Plague and Ebola have had on the world can be direct or indirect, with direct effects being the immediate result of illness and death and indirect effects being secondary results that occur not as cause-and-effect, but as a response.

In the events surrounding the Second Pandemic and Ebola, a mix of direct and indirect effects can be seen on many levels of society. The four levels on which the most similarities can be seen are mentality, medicine, legal structure, and economics.

Mentality
During both the Second Pandemic and the Ebola outbreak, suspension of rational thinking because of the fear of a disease rapidly infecting large numbers of people. It leaves its mark on society in a large number of ways. The effects that a disease engrains into a society may happen quickly or take many years to reach fruition. Some effects may be confined to the time a disease runs its course, and others may have consequences for years or even centuries later.

When a disease rapidly infects large numbers of people, it leaves its mark on society in a large number of ways. The effects that a disease engrains into a society may happen quickly or take many years to reach fruition. Some effects may be confined to the time a disease runs its course, and others may have consequences for years or even centuries later. Upon study of historical research and current event reports, it appears that there are still striking parallels between 1340’s Europe and the modern world in the way people respond to the mass outbreak of a deadly illness. The impacts the Plague and Ebola have had on the world can be direct or indirect, with direct effects being the immediate result of illness and death and indirect effects being secondary results that occur not as cause-and-effect, but as a response.

In the events surrounding the Second Pandemic and Ebola, a mix of direct and indirect effects can be seen on many levels of society. The four levels on which the most similarities can be seen are mentality, medicine, legal structure, and economics.

Law
Societies require laws and rules to maintain order. This is especially true when a disruptive disease afflicts a large number of people, the day-to-day economic activity that occurs within a nation can be severely disrupted. During the Second Pandemic of the 14th Century, where the Plague facilitated the decline of the feudalistic economic structure. Similar effects are present in the 2014 Ebola outbreak, but to a lesser extent than medieval Europe.

Economics
When a disease afflicts a large number of people, the day-to-day economic activity that occurs within a nation can be severely disrupted. During the Second Pandemic of the 14th Century, where the Plague facilitated the decline of the feudalistic economic structure. Similar effects are present in the 2014 Ebola outbreak, but to a lesser extent than medieval Europe.

Travel Restrictions. During the 2014 Ebola Outbreak, close to 50 countries instituted regulations that partially or completely interfered with travel and from the Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.

Conclusion
Progress has been made since the 1340’s. The world today is much better equipped and informed to handle outbreaks of deadly illnesses, but that does not mean we do not share many commonalities with the people of medieval Europe. We are still prone to fall victim to our fear and make what may not be rational or well-informed decisions, but we progress nonetheless, constantly changing along with our society, in no small way because of our responses to disease.

Adviser: Jeanine Aune, Department of English