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June Focus

'HOW many gallant gentlemen, fair ladies, and sprightly youths ... having breakfasted in the morning with their kinsfolk, acquaintances and friends, supped that same evening with their ancestors in the next world.' So wrote Boccaccio, describing the outbreak of plague in Florence in the introduction to the *Decameron*. The word 'plague' always conjures up images of the Black Death: death on an unimaginable scale, with too few left healthy to bury the dead and a breakdown of civil society. The sudden shortage of agricultural labour caused a dramatic rise in the price of labour, with one eyewitness account reporting 'many villages and hamlets became desolate'. The ability of labourers to demand more pay, despite the attempt to limit wages (which in itself helped to bring about the Peasants' revolt of 1381) was one of the shifts marking the change between mediaeval and renaissance periods (see page 434 in this issue).

In the same editorial, SARS is described as having the hallmarks of a plague. It has appeared with a suddenness and virulence that cause simultaneous terror and economic damage — a reminder in itself that the word originally meant 'a strike'. The personal account on page 508 conveys something of the terror. The outbreak in Hong Kong struck without warning and in devastating style. Medical staff fell ill in numbers large enough to leave those in charge worrying about the running of the hospital. It is a reminder of the truth, fundamental and everlasting (though forgotten in the past fifty years) that working with sick people is a risky business. To the detached observer in western Europe the panic over an illness that has killed few people the other side of the world is difficult to explain, even with the alarmingly high case-fatality rates quoted, but it may be the echo of the Black Death and its *memento mori* that the elaborate structures supporting our modern lives are much more fragile than we should care to remember.

Medical problems causing widespread social disruption may have causes other than infection. The ubiquitous problem of opiate addiction, with the wanton and widespread destruction of young lives, together with the associated crime, can feel like a plague. One consequence is that the 'problem' may be blamed for more than is entirely justified, as hinted by the account of the death of an opiate addict (page 471). The paper on page 461 suggests that we should not feel impotent in the face of opiate addiction, where the application of national guidelines has been helpful. This is a rare vote in favour of guidelines, whose proliferation in recent times has felt like a plague. Others see the machinery for increasing accountability as another plague. The early experience of appraisal reported on page 454 was generally positive. However, a message emerged that this was not to be confused with the procedure for revalidation, a theme taken up by the editorial on page 437. For a different sort of pestilence, there is the account on page 507 of a so-called plague of hedgehogs threatening the rich ground-nesting bird life in the Uists.

It would be wrong to end on a light-hearted note. By the most astonishing and heroic coordinated effort, SARS may already have been brought under control in Hong Kong and Toronto, and their economies will no doubt recover. But what is going on in the rural communities of mainland China, where a large, poor population has limited access to sophisticated medical care, nobody knows, perhaps not even the Chinese authorities in Beijing. Second, even if the plague of SARS turns out to be a short-lived episode, remember AIDS in southern Africa where the toll taken has all the apocalyptic echoes of the Black Death in Europe. Third, at the time of writing this column, the newspaper has carried an account of an outbreak of cholera in Iraq, as if to remind us that the old plagues are not going to be shoved aside by the new ones.

DAVID JEWELL
Editor

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