OVERVIEW

In the mid-19th century, the district of Soho was a haven for the lower class. The neighborhood had a unique blend of both profitable commercial and residential spaces, thanks to the success of the Industrial Revolution.

Unfortunately, this short-lived prosperity ended when Cholera undertook by a horrid bout of Cholera.

Cholera is a diarrheal disease that rapidly devastates the human body, causing death within days. During the 1850s, there were four major Cholera epidemics in London. Many people attributed these to Missa Theory, which theorized illnesses were spread through “bad air” or areas that smelled especially pungent.

THE MAN

John Snow was born March 13, 1813 in the city of York, England. After earning his doctorate degree from the University of London, Snow found an interest in the Cholera outbreaks plaguing Europe.

When Cholera struck Soho, Snow happened to live mere five minutes walk from the first epicenter. Determined to discover its origins, Snow began to investigate the disease.

THESES

John Snow, the man noted as the founder of Epidemiology, broke scientific barriers and popular beliefs surrounding the origins of disease, contributing to our modern knowledge of Medicine through his research during the 1854 Cholera outbreak in Soho, London.

"I have satisfied myself completely, that the chief mode of propagation of cholera in the South District of London, throughout the late outbreak, was by the water of the Southwark and Vauxhall Water Company containing the sewage of London."

John Snow, Testimony, March 5, 1857

THE FINDINGS

With cartographical evidence proving that cholera was being spread through Soho’s infected drinking water, Snow presented his findings to the Westminster Parish Vestry.

Snow also appealed to local authorities and successfully got the Broad Street pump handle removed. Almost immediately after, the new cases of cholera in Soho slowed to a halt.

BREAKING BARRIERS

Although Snow had effectively debunked Missa Theory with his work, the skepticism, as well as some of England’s most renowned scientists refused to let go of their beliefs.

Snow was able to point out how Cholera was spreading, but his opponents had to know why. Snow’s work was only truly validated until the latter half of the 19th century, when it became understood that diseases were caused by microorganisms.

John Snow broke barriers in science and social perception by disproving the commonly held Missa theory, and authenticating that cholera can be spread by water.

“...cholera matter or cholurine, where it is most fatal, is largely diffused through water, as well as through other channels...”

-William Farr, Registrar-General’s Seventeenth Annual Report on the 1854 Outbreak

THE INFLUENCE

This is significant to our knowledge of pathogens and their origins, and understanding how to track diseases can save countless lives.

The influence of his mapping techniques is even being seen during today’s pandemic, with scientists using advanced mapping software to study and combat COVID-19.