

## **Hospital Infection - then and now.**

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**15th April 2011**

**Imperial Hotel**

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This paper seeks to show that Hegel's aphorism that 'what experience teaches is this - that people and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it', applies with great force to hospital-acquired infection (HAI). The differing purposes of hospitals over many centuries is reviewed. From the 4th and 5th centuries BC there were excellent examples of hospital building which minimised the problem of HAI. Similar examples were maintained by the Romans in their valetudinaria for their legionnaires. By the 18th century hospitals had become places of appalling squalor. The nature and extent of HAI was tackled before Microbiology appeared as a discipline, largely as the result of the observational, epidemiological and experimental studies of people like James Lind, Alexander Gordon, John Bell, J Y Simpson, John Pringle and Semmelweis. These were followed by those who anticipated and utilised the rise of Microbiology - such as Lister, Pasteur, Ogston and Watson Cheyne. An era of antiseptics gave way to that of asepsis. This, in turn, gave way, between 1949 and 1960, to an era of optimism and complacency with the introduction of antibiotics. From 1960's to now we have the problems of multiple antibiotic resistance and that of new nosocomial infections. It is argued that changes within the practice of modern medicine and nursing are major factors in the present problem of HAI. We now have a generation of nurses and doctors who not only themselves have no conception of life without antibiotics, but have teachers who are similarly impoverished. Other professional and managerial changes may also have contributed - the breakdown of the ward and firm system; a lack of direct accountability; overcrowded wards with unrelenting throughputs which are target driven. We now have regulation by acronym - MMC, CPD, NICE, SPI, etc. The GMC itself has played an ambiguous role in its priorities. When faced with a particularly damning report of multiple deaths due to HAI, we have had the Prime Minister of the day announce a 'Deep Clean Day'. It is as though the remaining days could be celebrated as 'Tolerably Dirty Days'. Hegel was right.