

WHO 60th Anniversary Global Health Histories Seminars

LUNCHTIME SEMINAR,
Thursday 29th May 2008
12.30 – 14.00, Library Meeting Room

Marcel Proust and the Global History of Asthma

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The French novelist Marcel Proust (1871-1922) was plagued by asthma and hay fever from childhood. His ill-health reinforced contemporary beliefs that asthma and other allergic conditions were 'aristocratic diseases', largely confined to the elite and educated. By the late 20th century, however, the social geography of asthma had shifted dramatically. It has become a disease of poverty, triggered by poor housing, polluted environments, unhealthy diets, and social deprivation.

What factors led to this apparent transition in asthma's character and social distribution? This paper considers evidence of rising levels of asthma in Western countries during the mid-20th century, increasing prevalence and severity among immigrant groups in post-war American cities; sharply rising mortality rates amongst young asthmatics during the 1950s and 1960s, and growing awareness of the global spread of asthma into developing countries. It also looks at evidence uncovered by surveys coordinated by the WHO's immunology unit.



Co-organized with The Wellcome Trust Centre for the History of Medicine, University College, London
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