Public Health

Aneurin Bevan (1897-1960)

Many of the ideas behind the Welfare State came from William Beveridge. Before the First World War it took the determination of David Lloyd George to force through changes. After the Second World War, it was another Welsh politician, Aneurin Bevan, who overcame opposition to the Welfare State.

Who was he?
Bevan was born in Tredegar in Wales, the son of a miner. Through his own determination and effort, he became one of the most important ministers in the 1945-1951 Labour government.

What did he do?
Bevan came from a poor working class background; he was familiar with the problems of poverty and disease. As a trade union leader and Labour Party member, he fought all his life to end inequality through the intervention of the state. When Labour came to power in 1945 after the Second World War, Bevan was responsible for establishing the National Health Service. This was set up on 5th July 1948, the 'Appointed Day', when the government took over responsibility for all medical services so that they were free for anybody who needed help.

Was Bevan's idea popular?
At first there was a great deal of opposition to the idea of the National Health Service. When the British Medical Association (BMA) questioned doctors in January 1948, 88% were opposed to the idea of a National Health Service. They were frightened that they would lose their independence and be forced to take orders from the government. Bevan was able to win them round by allaying their fears and by listening to their opinions.

What happened next?
Hospital consultants were promised a salary and allowed to treat private patients in National Health Service hospitals. This allowed the consultants to keep a separate private income. By July 1948 90% of doctors had joined the new National Health Service. The NHS took over responsibility for the 1,143 voluntary hospitals and 1545 municipal hospitals in Britain, previously run by Local Authorities and voluntary bodies. Family doctors were provided throughout the country; these became known as General Practitioners, or GPs.

What was his legacy?
In 1951 Bevan resigned from the government. In protest against the introduction of charges for dental care. Already one of the problems facing the National Health Service had emerged. How could the government find the money to pay for it? This is a problem that still exists today, 50 years after the NHS was set up.
Salmonella sandwich

There are many ways in which the health of the public is protected today, but occasionally nasty little bugs get loose. One of the worst cases happened at Loch Maree in the highlands of Scotland in August 1922.

Some of the guests of the Loch Maree Hotel set off for the day on a fishing trip, supplied with a bulging picnic hamper of potted cold meat sandwiches. At lunchtime they set about the delicious food with great relish. Within an hour they felt dizzy. Their eyelids drooped and their throats began to tighten. They began to vomit and sweat and could hardly move their arms and legs. Within two days eight had died.

The nasty little germ that proved to be a mass murderer was called botulism. It grows without oxygen - as in the jar of potted meat which the poor guests had enjoyed. Loch Maree was the first known outbreak of the germ in Britain, it was not to be the last.