

“Join together - the wolf only snatches the stray bird that flies away from the flock”

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NH Wood



Medical mask-wearing has a long history dating back to the popular beaded masks worn by doctors in the 17th century during the plague epidemic. They believed that the disease spread through miasmas - bad smells that wafted through the air. Their clothing was thus intended to protect them from these airborne diseases.

Plague doctor outfit from Germany (17th century).
Image source: Juan Antonio Ruiz Rivas, CC BY-SA 3.0

The original "beak doctor" costume was believed to have been invented by the French doctor Charles de Lorme in 1619 who advocated doctors and surgeons wear a full head-to-toe protective garment.

It consisted of an ankle-length overcoat, boots, a wide rimmed hat (that indicated their profession), and a bird-like beak mask. The mask had glass openings for the eyes and a curved beak shaped like a bird's beak with straps that held it in front of the doctor's nose.

The beak had two small nose holes which acted like a type of respirator, and was filled with sweet or strong smelling aromatic items. These included dried flowers, herbs, camphor, or a vinegar-soaked sponge. Doctors believed the herbs would ward off the odours that spread the plague, and prevent them from becoming infected.

In addition, they used wooden canes to point out areas needing attention and to examine patients without touching them. The canes were also used to keep people away, to remove clothing from plague victims without having to touch them, and to take a patient's pulse!

In the early 1900's, prior to the influenza epidemic, only surgeons and nurses wore masks when they were treating contagious patients. However, during the flu epidemic, cities around the world passed mandatory masking orders. This practice was embraced by the American public as "an emblem of public spiritedness and discipline."

Today we are once again facing a global pandemic that has seen the resurgence of mandatory mask wearing as well as the use of hand sanitisers, and social dis-

tancing. We now need to all "flock together" and adhere to these measures, known as 'the new normal' if we are to survive and thrive.

References

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Paul Fürst, engraving, c. 1721, of a plague doctor of Marseilles (introduced as 'Dr Beaky of Rome'). His nose-case is filled with herbal material to keep off the plague.