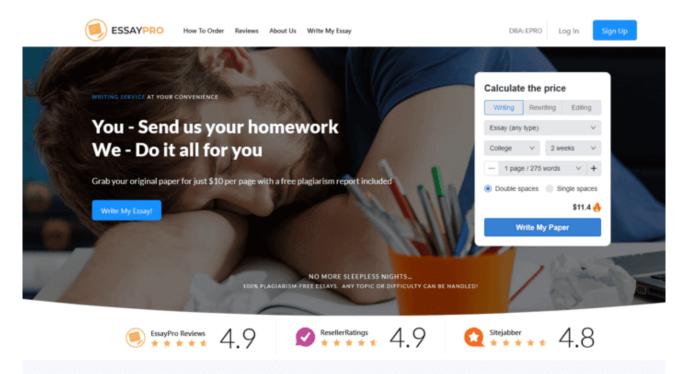
Leprosy



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Leprosy

Leprosy, now more commonly referred to as Hansen's disease, is one of the world's oldest and most feared maladies. Over the course of thousands of years, it has managed to afflict millions of people in every region of the world. In addition to physical suffering, leprosy patients also faced tremendous psychological distress, due to the fact that, until as recently as last century, the disease was seen as a punishment from God and thought to be highly contagious. As a result, leprosy sufferers faced many indignities and, in some instances, were removed from their communities and relocated to so-called "Leper Colonies." However, in recent times, the conditions for people with leprosy have vastly improved in terms of both the treatment of the disease and removal of the stigma attached to it.

The origins of leprosy cannot be definitively traced to any particular place or time. The earliest evidence of the disease is provided by the Hindu Vedas, which mention a disease that most believe to have been leprosy, suggesting its existence in India since at least 1400 BCE (Skillicorn). There is more concrete evidence from members of the medical community that the disease existed in China by the fifth-century BCE and in Egypt as early

as the second-century BCE. The disease is believed to have spread to Europe in the first-century BCE by Roman soldiers returning from war in Egypt. Its existence in Europe was first documented by Aractus and Galen in approximately 150 CE (Skillicorn). It is believed to have been spread from Europe to the Americas and South Pacific islands by European colonists. The disease became universally known as Hansen's disease in 1873 after a Norwegian scientist, Dr. Armauer Hansen, discovered the bacterium that causes the disease, which eventually served to end the myth that the disease was a curse of God (Skillicorn).

The disease is caused by a slowly multiplying bacillus, called Mycobacterium leprae, which primarily affects the nerves, skin, and mucous membranes (Hansen's Disease). Scientists are still unable to cultivate the organism in any bacteriological media, although it has been successfully grown on the foot pads of mice.

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