

# The Euro-biomedical Impact on the American Indian

In the Foreword to The Columbian Exchange by Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., Otto von Mering describes the book as an "anthropomedical" look at the history of the New World-Old World connection. The author states in the Preface that "...the most important changes brought on by the Columbian voyages were biological in nature." Throughout chapters 1 and 2 of the book, Crosby considers the significance of the diseases that European explorers and settlers brought to the Americas and New World islands.

To understand the impact of the "new" diseases to the American native peoples, one should consider the relatively isolated state in which those people lived prior to the European itch to discover and conquer. Many tribes of the native American Indians had legends of a great white god who would arrive someday...but with how much credibility or faith could they have ever known that the prophecy would come to be? In contrast, for centuries the American inhabitants literally existed as unknowns to the white men across the ocean. Speculation of the ancestors of New World peoples crossing a land bridge during some ancient Ice Age or world-wide "low-tide" has attempted to explain their presence. Subsequent geological and geographical occurrences contributed to the "cutting off" of their civilization. Left to develop their own lives without the African, Asian, or European influence of their supposed predecessors, they developed their own culture technology, political structure, and biological characteristics. If one focuses on the biological aspect, the setting is provided for how European diseases were able to exert their impact on the residents of the New World.

One of the first differences discussed by Crosby is the distribution of blood-types worldwide, and how the isolation of the American peoples could be emphasized by physiological differences, including the almost unique dispersal of their type O blood. Another factor considered by the author is that the "quarantined" status of the Indians. When one considers immunity to disease, he was not prepared for even the most minor or latent of European illnesses. Crosby notes that "Migration of man and his maladies is the chief cause of epidemics." The physiological differences and geographical isolation were destined to take their tolls.

The immediate impact of the arrival of these virulent enemies is evidenced by their overwhelming destruction to American lives. Where the Europeans had some immunity to these diseases (and were resented for it), the symptoms upon the Indians were horrifying and almost disproportional to today's standards. A native of the Yucatan wrote of "aching bones," "high fever," "burning chest," "abdominal pain," and "headache" as being nonexistent prior to the arrival of their visitors from Europe. Observations by the Europeans also noted the extreme susceptibility of the Indians. One missionary stated that the Indians seemed to die from merely looking at or smelling a Spaniard.

The evidence supports the idea that the disease most often attributed to this devastation was smallpox. There are translations of terminology, similarity of symptoms, and the presence of pneumonia and pleurisy following the illness—a common event following smallpox.

The chain of decimation had begun. Smallpox was compiled with several diseases at a time and wiped out so many Indians that population decreases started to threaten their society. The

reduction in numbers allowed the Spaniards to overtake the Indians with less struggle, a blow to the pride of any civilization. As they succumbed to European rule, they were enslaved to work in the fields of their European masters, but even the food supply was threatened by the disease and death. Shortage of manpower due to sickness began to mean shortage of food. Having had no previous knowledge of the new illnesses, the medical professionals of the New World were not able to alleviate the problem, either. Lack of adequate medical care contributed to the snowball.

And no one but the Europeans were immune. When the epidemic became widespread, tribal elders and leaders also were victims. Their incapacitations and deaths broke many links in the chain of Indian command. With societal leaders gone, the opportunity for even more forceful Spanish rule increased.

The prophecy of the great white god was fulfilled. It was supported by his resistance to the devastating plague and his ability to capitalize on the unfortunate condition of the Indians in order to gain control over them. The European diseases introduced to the Americas could be said to have led to the eventual downfall of the American Indians.