

Tuberculosis and the perils of historical amnesia

In a recent Comment published in *The Lancet*, Hans Henri P Kluge emphasised the urgency of addressing drug-resistant tuberculosis in the WHO European region.¹ Although the health security framing underscores important risks, it might overlook the deeper historical and structural forces that have long shaped the persistence of tuberculosis.

Tuberculosis has long been a social disease, and, as Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902) observed, medicine is a social science and science for humankind (*die Medicin, als eine sociale Wissenschaft, als die Wissenschaft vom Menschen*).² The pre-antibiotic decline in tuberculosis mortality was driven not by pharmaceuticals but by broad social reforms—ie, improved housing, nutrition, labour protection, and public hygiene. Sanatoria across Germany, Russia, and the UK embodied a recognition that tuberculosis required long-term, holistic care, emphasising the need for rest, nutrition, and social support.³

In any regional analysis, an equally important aspect to consider is the collapse of Soviet-era health systems in the 1990s, which undermined tuberculosis control and fuelled the spread of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis.⁴ However, Kluge's Comment touches less extensively on these important historical disruptions and the enduring role of poverty, overcrowding, and substandard housing in sustaining tuberculosis in the present era.

As an additional point to complement Kluge's Comment, we suggest a paedagogical perspective: palaeopathological evidence from Neolithic skeletons and Egyptian mummies attests to the deep antiquity of tuberculosis.⁵ Integrating this long historical view into educational and popular science programmes could help in fostering

empathy, destigmatising the disease, and reframing tuberculosis not as an exotic threat but as a reflection of structural inequality.

Overall, we agree with Kluge that tuberculosis is a political disease but would emphasise that its politics are inseparable from its history.

We declare no competing interests.

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