Grasping at Straws: Fear, Superstition, and Subsequent “Cures”
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Human history is much shorter than that of microbes, but when the two intertwine the effect is astounding. Microbes are “microscopic living organisms such as bacteria”, and though invisible to the human eye before the 17th century, play a pivotal role in the development of the human race, responsible for both its success and many of its hardships. Without human detection some microbes carry out such vital-to-life processes as digestion while some will cause you to purge every ounce of water in your body. The human race has a well documented history of fear of what it does not understand, and the secret life of microbes left people groping for explanations to bring reason into a situation seemingly beyond their control. When the Bubonic Plague was rampant, many people found blame in others, such as the Jews. When AIDS swept the nation people blamed homosexuals. In times of desperation people seek cures that often lack any medical legitimacy. During the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918 every household had a method of preventing the disease: Cotton bags holding a lump of camphor and then worn on a cord around the neck, or hot coals sprinkled with sulfur or brown sugar and carried through the house along with clouds of smoke are a few of many examples. Fear of what we do not understand has driven people to find comfort and security in their own explanations, which are derived from a number of sources, such as religion or superstition. People would perform rituals or place blame without being backed by science, which may not have been available to them or completely ignored or lost among many scientific claims. Throughout history we’ve been faced with things beyond our understanding, and understanding people’s reactions to the unknown will help us cope with fear in a way to prevent hysteria and introduce reason.

1 The invention of the microscope in the 17th century enabled scientists to view microscopic organisms.