Gorgas, William Crawford

US military physician who developed methods to prevent the spread of yellow fever. He eradicated yellow fever in Havana, Cuba, during and after the Spanish-American war by initiating measures to improve sanitation and using quarantine to isolate carriers of the disease.

**Improving sanitation** Gorgas set out to reduce the number of deaths from malaria, typhoid fever, dysentery, and yellow fever in Havana. He believed, as did many at the time, that all these diseases were ‘filth’ diseases and initiated measures to improve sanitary amenities. He built drains, had stable floors cemented and arranged refuse removal. The reduction in the number of cases of malaria, typhoid fever and dysentery was startling.

Gorgas noted that those who succumbed to the disease were generally Spanish soldiers, or Spanish immigrants after the war, and realized that the local population must be resistant, presumably owing to infection early in life.

**Life** Gorgas was born in Mobile, Alabama, and educated at Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York. He then joined the US Army Medical Corps as a physician. In 1898, when the fighting of the Spanish-American war was almost over, Gorgas was sent to Havana as the chief sanitary officer.

**Transmission by mosquito** While Gorgas was in Cuba, Walter Reed, another US military physician, realized that transmission of yellow fever was via the mosquito parasite *Aedes aegypti* and that the infectious agent had to develop within the mosquito for a number of days. When Gorgas learned of this he confined victims to mosquito-proof rooms and introduced fines to penalize any house owner who was found to have mosquito larvae on his premises. By these means he eradicated yellow fever from Havana.

Gorgas's next fight against yellow fever was during the US construction of the Panama Canal, which began in 1904. While he never eradicated the disease, he greatly reduced the number of cases and was generally considered the world's greatest expert on the control of the disease until his death.
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