Diphtheria was probably present in antiquity, although it was not distinguishable from other throat diseases at the time. Deadly epidemics were recognized in the Middle Ages and up to the present century. Although vaccine programmes have made the disease a rarity in the modern era, it persists in countries where circumstances cause a failure of vaccine programmes and where anti-vaccination groups are active. Diphtheria still occurs occasionally in the UK, and laboratories must be able to recover the organism from patients suffering from this serious and still-life-threatening disease.

**Ancient world**
- Classical medical writings refer to severe sore throat ending in death, termed Kynchie (Greek) or organ (Latin).
- Descriptions record its fatal inflammatory affection of the throat and larynx with difficulty in swallowing and breathing, sometimes resulting in deaths.
- First descriptions by Anthus of Cappadocia in the second century CE, Celsus in his De Medicina (170–275 CE) and Anthus of Amida in the sixth century CE.
- Spanish writers of the 10th century describe a disease that may have been diphtheria.
- Similar descriptions are found in The Chronicle of St Dionysius (500 AD) and the Ecclesiastical History of the Persians describing a plague of "mortal throat disease".
- Classical symptoms: Kynchie: tracheitis, angina, organitis contigua, exudative, submucous, of glottis, bronchitis, pharyngitis.

**Early modern world**
- Seven "Angina Philophaea Contagiosa" cases in the Rhine region and in Amsterdam where Van Hoozer described it as "very destructive to children".

**Modern world**
- 1925 CE: Philippe Gény publishes for the first time a study with a low mortality rate of the disease in Paris.
- 1929 CE: Cuthbert Harkness reports a "smudge" in the throat which is called the "Harkness tip".
- 1929 CE: Dr. Harkness describes and publishes the "Harkness" technique of swabbing the throat.
- 1932 CE: Dr. Harkness develops the "Harkness" technique for swabbing the throat.
- 1934 CE: Dr. Harkness publishes a PPE test for the detection of the throat swab.
- 1937: A modified Harkness test is published by Francis et al.
- Better diagnosis and treatment lead to a dramatic drop in diphtheria cases.

**Nineteenth-century crises**
- France suffers significant outbreaks.
- Large outbreaks occur in Switzerland, Germany, Scandinavia, USA and Britain.
- Diphtheria becomes endemic in the mid-19th century.

**Diagnosis**
- Hungarian bacteriologist Róbert Sókó develops the Sókó test to detect the presence of immunity to diphtheria.
- 1931-1932: Maud and colleagues describe isolation of diphtheria bacilli from blood in large numbers and cell cultures from severe disease "graves" type and those from milder cases, "typing" disease. Later they describe this "typing" type.
- Philip Warren: He develops the Warren-Wood test for identification of diphtheria of the "clear" type.
- 1941-1943: Dr. Harkness describes a method for detecting the "Harkness tip" in the throat.
- 1940-1943: Diphtheria mortality rate is reduced by 90%.
- 1947: A modified Harkness test is published by Francis et al.
- Better diagnosis and treatment lead to a dramatic drop in deaths from diphtheria.

**Immunisation and control**
- The disease becomes a localised disease of the 20th century.
- A vaccine is introduced in 1942.
- The vaccine is now universally recommended.

**Forgotten, but not gone**
- Old diseases that can still bite
- Produced by members of the History Committee for Congress 2017

**Mediaeval world**
- No real medical evidence on medical diphtheria but constant references from that the disease was present and active.
- 1029 CE: The Byzantine chronicler Costain records an outbreak of Kynchie.
- 1492 CE: Martinus Scholtz (Physician in Nuremberg) describes a disease that was probably diphtheria.

**Resurgence of diphtheria**
- Diphtheria outbreaks where vaccination programmes collapse or where anti-vaccination groups are dominant.
- Second World War: War-nears over one million cases of diphtheria and approximately 50,000 deaths.
- Improperly manufactured diphtheria vaccine leads to large outbreaks in children.
- 1950s: Large outbreaks in Russia and former Eastern States due to the collapse of vaccination programmes.
- 200-300 million cases with mortality rates reaching 20% in the worst areas.
- Isolated cases still occur in the US (occasional small outbreaks who are 11 cases in one small outbreak in a London borough).
- In Europe and India there were 14 cases in 2016 and nine cases in 2015.
- Recent outbreaks include India (2015), Korea in India (2015), and Yemen (2016).

The efficient vaccination programmes and general lack of laboratory screening have led to widespread coverage of diphtheria being missed — truly forgotten but not gone.