



Historically Speaking

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Ancient Greek Medicine

Ancient Greek medicine had many components, intertwining the spiritual with the physical. Specifically, the Greeks believed health was affected by the humors, geographic location, social class, diet, trauma, beliefs, and mindset.

Humorism (or the four humors) refers to blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Each of the four humors were linked to an organ, temper, season and element. It was also theorized that gender played a role in medicine because some diseases and treatments were different for females than for males. Geographic location and social class also were thought to play a role as the living conditions of the people would subject them to different environmental issues such as mosquitoes, rats, and availability of clean drinking water. Diet was thought to be an issue as well and might be affected by a lack of access to adequate nourishment. Trauma, such as that suffered by gladiators, from dog bites or other injuries, played a role in theories relating to understanding anatomy and infections. Additionally, there was significant focus on the beliefs and mindset of the patient in the diagnosis and treatment theories. It was recognized that the mind played a role in healing, or that it might also be the sole basis for the illness. The humoral theory states that good health comes from a perfect balance of the four humors: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Consequently, poor health resulted from improper balance of the four humors.

(This newsletter draws from ANCIENT GREEK MEDICINE, Wikipedia)



Physician treating a patient
(480–470 BC)



Upcoming Projects

There are two projects that are in the works. One is a non-fiction piece tentatively titled "To Teach". It is shaping up to be part memoir and part treatise on the art and science of teaching based on the four decades I spent in that profession. The other project is the next novel(s) based in ancient Egypt. I have yet to decide on the date of the piece. In fact, there is only a vague concept so far. I have been doing research and some planning around plot. I believe this one will get started for real later this fall. I don't know that it will be a series, but I will work on it with that possibility in mind, as I seem to become entranced by the cast of characters that happen along the way.

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Hippocrates, known as the "Father of Modern Medicine", established a medical school at Cos and is the most important figure in ancient Greek medicine. Hippocrates and his students documented numerous illnesses and developed the Hippocratic Oath for physicians, which is still in use today. He and his students also created medical terminology that is part of our vocabulary today. Medical words included acute, chronic, epidemic, exacerbation, relapse, and others.

Asclepius was espoused as the first physician, and myth placed him as the son of Apollo. Temples dedicated to the healer-god Asclepius, functioned as centers of medical advice, prognosis, and healing. At these shrines, patients would enter a dream-like state of induced sleep known as "enkoimesis" (sometimes induced with the help of substances such as opium), in which they either received guidance from the deity in a dream or were cured by surgery. The Temple of Asclepius in Pergamum had a spring that flowed down into an underground room in the Temple.

People would come to drink the waters and to bathe in them because they were believed to have medicinal properties. Mud baths and hot teas such as chamomile were used to calm them or peppermint tea to soothe their headaches, which is still a home remedy used by many today.

The Rod of Asclepius is a universal symbol for medicine to this day. However, it is frequently confused with Caduceus, which was a staff wielded by the god Hermes. The Rod of Asclepius embodies one snake with no wings whereas Caduceus is represented by two snakes and a pair of wings depicting the swiftness of Hermes.

Women in Medicine

Originally, in ancient Greece, women were not allowed to become doctors, however, there are some accounts of female doctors who practiced medicine. One such account was that of the female doctor **Agnodice**. According to legend, Agnodice was a woman in ancient Greece who disguised herself as a man to study medicine and become a doctor.

While under the guise of practicing as a man, Agnodice was able to secure an apprenticeship under the then physician and gynecologist, Herophilus and learn the skills necessary to practice medicine herself. To provide comfort to her patients, it is believed that Agnodice would expose herself to female patients in order to prove that she was a woman. Eventually, she was discovered and put on trial for practicing medicine as a woman. Once again, she exposed herself to the court to prove the truth about her existence as a woman practicing medicine. The outcome was that she was found as violating the law, specifically against women being able to learn medicine. However, her female patients came to her defense and testified that she had helped them when no male doctor could. Agnodice was acquitted and soon after the law was changed in Athens. After her trial, all free-born women were then legally allowed to practice medicine.



Surgical tools, 5th century BCE. Reconstructions based on descriptions in the Hippocratic corpus. Thessaloniki Technology Museum.