

Ancient Greek Medicine

Medicine was very important to the Ancient Greek. Ancient Greek Culture was such that a high priority was placed upon healthy lifestyles, this despite Ancient Greece being much different to the Greece of the modern World.

Ancient Greece was much different to the Greece of today. In Ancient Times Greece was a collection of City States. Each of these was independent from the others but shared a similar culture and religious beliefs. Despite the lack of a coherent government the Greeks developed a society that matched, if not bettered, that of the Ancient Egyptians.

Medical practice in Ancient Greece, like Egypt, was based largely upon religious beliefs. The Cult of Asclepius grew in popularity and was a major provider of medical care. This cult developed old theories and introduced several treatments not too dissimilar from modern 'alternative medicines'.

The Ancient Greeks though made major strides in medical knowledge. The works of Hippocrates and his followers led to several scientific facts being recorded for the first time: and perhaps more significantly the work of these philosophers began a tradition of studying the cause of disease rather than looking solely at the symptoms when prescribing a cure.

The legacy of the Ancient Greek world on medical practice has been great. Hippocrates theory of the Four Humours was, for a long time, the basis upon which to develop medical reasoning. Likewise the methodology employed by the Greeks has, to a large extent, been retained and modified to form what we now consider to be conventional medicine.

Hippocrates

Hippocrates was a Greek philosopher who lived from approximately 460 BC to 377 BC. His work is of great significance to Historians as the books written by him, or his followers, are the first examples of what Greek medical thought was based upon.

The theories of Hippocrates dismissed the notion that Magic or spirits could cause or cure disease. Instead people such as Hippocrates argued that the doctor should not apply the same theory for the cause of a disease to every case. Instead the doctor ought to observe the patient carefully and make a judgment after careful consideration of the symptoms. this differed from the observations of the Egyptians in that there was no 'prescribed' method of treating the disease, superstition and religion were not part and parcel of Hippocrates method of treating the sick.

Essentially Hippocratic medicine allowed diseases to run their natural course, with doctors giving treatments such as herbal remedies to ease pain. Only when absolutely necessary and after a reasonable period of observation and thought should a doctor resort to Surgery: which in a world without anesthetics was not always successful.

The Theory of the Four Humours

The Theory of the Four Humours was an important development in medical knowledge which originated in the works of Aristotle. The Greeks believed that the body was made up of four main components or Four Humours. These Four Humours needed to remain balanced in order for people to remain healthy.

The Four Humours were liquids within the body- blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These could be connected to the four seasons of the year: Yellow Bile with summer, black bile with autumn, phlegm with winter and blood with spring.

Hippocrates and other Greek practitioners argued that the balance of the Four humours would be most effected in those particular seasons. For example, if someone has a fever they would have been thought to have had too much blood in their body. The logical cure therefore is to 'bleed' the patient.

Use of the Four Humours as a diagnostic tool would result in doctors looking for symptoms: the first time that clinical observation of a patient was recorded.

The Cult of Asclepius

Asclepius was the Greek God of healing. Worshippers built large temple complexes around Greece in his name. Throughout the period, and into the era of the Roman Empire, people would visit these temples to be healed.

The Cult of Asclepius, which developed older ideas based on religious healing and introduced many more forms of 'alternative' treatment, was at it's peak from the Fifth century BC through to as late as 400AD.

At a Asclepion (one of the temples) a patient would be expected to partake in a number of rituals, which, it was believed, would cure the infirm. In brief these rituals consisted of:

- Making sacrifices
- Bathing
- Sleeping in the courtyard

It is widely believed that the priests would have healed many visitors to Asclepion's through the use of ointments and herbal remedies

Alexandria

The city of Alexandria is a lasting tribute to Alexander the Great. It plays an important role in the development of medicine in both the Greek and Roman eras.

Alexander the Great not only had a talent on the battlefield (he created a huge empire between 334 and 326 BC) but was also a man who appreciated science and philosophy. A lasting tribute to this is the City of Alexandria, in the modern day Egypt. This city was unique in ancient times as it provided physicians and doctors with opportunities that had hitherto been denied.

In Alexandria was built a massive library that contained the works of all of the greatest philosophers of the day, such as Aristotle and Plato. These men argued that the soul of a person left the body upon death and that, therefore, dissection of the body was permissible. The influence of these philosophers in Alexandria was such that dissection was, for the first time, allowed to happen in Alexandria. This allowed doctors to see the workings of the body and must have led to a greater understanding of physiology. (For a short period of time the dissection of LIVE people, criminals who were condemned to death, was allowed to happen in Alexandria).

These practices led to the development of theories of a nervous system (Herophilus) which were later developed and tested by doctors such as Erasistratus.

Public Health in Ancient Greece

The Ancient Greek would not have been too unfamiliar with some of the health and fitness regimes that are used by people today. The word 'Regimen' was used by the Greeks to describe peoples lifestyles: from which can be derived the word regimented (as in organised). The Greek philosophy of 'Regimen' covered what people ate, drank, the types and amount of exercise that they took and how much sleep they had.

These ideas were very thorough: it demonstrates that the Greeks knew that lifestyle could affect the quality of life, as evidenced by their development and championing of the Olympics. Such is the quality of the remaining evidence that we can even see that doctors advice differed for those who were rich: and could therefore afford to spend time and money on relaxing, and those who worked or were poorer: and therefore couldn't maintain as healthy a lifestyle as possible.