

Roman Medicine

Roman medicine was a mixture of new theories and developments of Greek practices. Medicine was improved through the studies of Galen, through a desire to maintain a fit and healthy army and through empirical observation. medicine in Ancient Rome also brought about some great developments of Public Health facilities

Background to life in Roman times

The Roman Empire lasted a period of in excess of one thousand years. The Empire, held together by a complex and extremely advanced political network and communications system, extended knowledge and introduced a way of life that dramatically improved the standard of living of many of their citizens.

A basic Roman belief in the importance of cleanliness, combined with a desire to ensure a comfortable life for the citizens within the army or living in the provinces led to a unique system of sewers and aqueducts that rival even the finest examples of Victorian public Health structures.

Roman Life revolved around Trade and War. A structured government allowed political decisions to be made relatively swiftly and the vastness of the empire led to certain relaxations of the previously strict rules relating to medical practice: although some of these, it could be argued were inherited from the Greeks.

Public health was developed by the Romans as they believed that cleanliness would lead to good health. The Romans made links between causes of disease and methods of prevention. as a consequence they developed a large system of Public Health works around their empire.

The Romans believed that Prevention of illness was more important than cure of illness. Roman Philosophy was based along the lines of searching for a reason then establishing a preventative measure to minimize the risk attached. As a practical people they used observations of the environment to determine what was causing ill health. This form of empirical observation led the Romans to realise that death rates were higher in and around marshes and swamps.

The cure would then be based upon logic. As the Romans believed that Gods held the key to longevity of life they initially built Temples to the gods near large swamps to pacify them and reduce the deaths. Alternatives to this were the drainage of swamps and they also ensured that the army and important people lived away from these areas.

Such empirical observations led the Romans to believe that ill health could be associated with, amongst other things, bad air, bad water, swamps, sewage, debris and lack of personal cleanliness. In some places, Rome included, it is impossible to avoid all of these unless something is physically done to alter the environment. The Romans, being technologically adequate, resolved to provide clean water through aqueducts, to remove the bulk of sewage through the building of sewers and to develop a system of public toilets throughout their towns and city's. Personal hygiene was encouraged through the building of large public baths (The City of Bath being an obvious British example of these).

The consequence of this pragmatic approach to preventative measures was an advanced system of public health structures, many of which are still visible in places today.

The Roman Army

The Roman Army was responsible for many of the great developments of medicine in the Roman Empire. Care and attention for the army was of vital importance and it was the army that, more often than not, was responsible for implementation of the great Public Health developments around the empire.

The need to have a fit and healthy armed force may at first seem both obvious and easy to ensure. In the modern world selection is largely of the fittest and training techniques can be utilised to make sure that they stay this way. In Roman Times the onus was largely upon the military to ensure that recruits had the means to get fit enough prior to enrollment and a large degree of effort was put into providing for the soldiers health once he was enlisted.

The Military would often be entering and controlling lands with little if any idea of public health or of the need for personal hygiene. Take Britain at the time of the invasion for example. Evidence from the invading Romans suggests that the land was marshy and forever foggy. The Britons had built no public baths, aqueducts or

sewage systems. To the conquering Roman Army this was a potentially dangerous situation.

The evidence of the Army's importance with regards public health and preventative medicine is clear upon examination of the remains of Hadrian's Wall and the surrounding areas. Forts along the wall often had baths, there are remains of aqueducts around many Roman sites in Britain and sewage works were common place alongside 'flushing' toilets within fort complexes.

Galen

Galen developed his Medical knowledge through periods studying at the Asclepion at Pergamum, through a short spell working in Alexandria and as a doctor to the Gladiators in Rome.

These experiences allowed Galen to develop an understanding of anatomy, and led him to have a firm believe that clinical observation as professed by Hippocrates, was a necessity in curing ailments of all kinds. Galen rose to prominence following his appointment as the surgeon to the Emperors son, Commodus. This allowed him to study and teach medicine: which led to his development of ideas and his establishment of new laws of medicine.

Galen studied the bodies of animals to support his research. particularly he used Barbary Apes which are very similar in terms of anatomy to Humans. This type of research, along with the dissection of human remains that he conducted in Alexandria, led to the development of his theory on the Human Body's physiological system. This was a remarkable, if slightly incorrect, development which would allow doctors and physicians to clearly understand the effects of the treatments given.

Galen's work was painstaking. His writings always dealt with possible objections and criticisms of theories and he regularly reviewed practices. The depth of his writings and the support of the authorities (including the religious authorities) led to his belief in clinical observation and diagnosis becoming the standard practice for doctors in Europe over the course of the next thousand years.