

Medical Ethics

Hippocrates: an ideal that lives

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WHO and the ideas it represents can be seen as the logical outcome of a process which began about 2400 years ago with the work of Hippocrates.

Even today, Hippocrates represents for a great many people the ideal of the devoted, discreet and compassionate physician. His attitudes were determined by the Hellenic environment, but his principles were in many ways similar to those of the World Health Organization, whose Constitution states that “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.

The fifth century BC was the golden age of Greek culture, and the ideas formulated then have been a major reference point ever since. Some of the most beautiful works of architecture, sculpture and painting the world has ever seen were produced during this period. Athens was at the heart of all this activity, but

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there were other centres as well, and to discover the golden age of medicine we must look particularly at the small island of Cos, where Hippocrates was born in about 460 BC.

Hippocrates the man

Plato, a younger contemporary, refers to Hippocrates in the *Protagoras* and the *Phaedrus* as the famous “Asclepiad”, a term which apparently meant a physician belonging to a family that had produced well-known physicians for several generations (Asclepius was the god of medicine). A large body of writings by or about Hippocrates and his teachings was kept, probably at the medical school at Cos, and transferred during the third or second century BC to the great library at Alexandria.

The so-called Alexandrian stories about the life of Hippocrates are rich in detail. He studied medicine and philosophy under famous teachers before becoming one himself, and travelled throughout the Hellenic world, curing a Macedonian king of a sexual disease and ridding Athens of the plague by having fires lit in the city squares, which suggests the incineration of infected material. He was asked to go to Persia to cure King Artaxerxes but refused, and died at an advanced age (between 375 and 351 BC) at Larissa in Thessaly. Subsequent generations saw him as the lawgiver of medicine and the ideal physician who, as Galen put it, “spent his life practising his art with purity and enthusiasm”. Many biographies, based on

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tradition and imagination as well as facts, have been published over the centuries.

The Hippocratic writings

The body of medical treatises known as the “Hippocratic Collection” consists of about 60 works, some of them in several volumes, which vary enormously in subject and style. Many efforts have been made to discover which of them were actually written by Hippocrates, and every commentator on the collection has his or her own list of “authentic” and “false” works. Most of these works were written between 430 and 330 BC, some later. The subject matter includes general pathology and the pathology of specific diseases, diagnosis, prognosis, methods of treatment, preventive medicine, physiology, embryology, gynaecology, epidemiology, surgery, and medical ethics. The ethical code formulated as the Hippocratic oath is still seen as valid in the medical profession today.

Some of the works are carefully written lectures which seem to be addressed simultaneously to doctors, medical students and the general public. Hippocrates evidently assumed that every educated person should know something about health, and that community involvement was needed to maintain it and to avoid disease. We find the same view in WHO’s Constitution, which states that “Informed opinion and active cooperation on the part of the public are of the utmost importance in the improvement of the health of the people”.

It is often difficult if not impossible to sort out the authorship and structure of the various texts, but they supply valuable insights into the development of rational medicine in Greece. Collections of quotations and notes, such as the *Aphorisms*, were not designed as units and were often added to and rearranged. Some examples are as follows (see Note at the end):

- *Life is short, science is long... It is not enough for the physician to do what is necessary, but the patient and the attendants must do their part as well.*
- *Acute diseases attain the crisis within fourteen days.*
- *Every disease occurs at all seasons of the year but some of them occur more frequently and are of greater severity at certain times. (This is perhaps an early precursor of the modern idea of epidemiology.)*
- *What drugs will not cure, the knife will; what the knife will not cure, the cautery will; what the cautery will not cure must be considered incurable.*

The treatise on *Prognosis* offers a mine of information on what was known in the ancient world about symptoms and their prognostic value. It also shows that treatment in Hippocratic medicine was principally dietetic.

The Hippocratic Collection also contains a treatise entitled *A regimen for health*. It is only a few pages long but is full of interesting observations and gives some idea of the life-style of the upper classes of ancient Greece. It

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does not discuss the general effect of individual foods – this was done in other books – but starts with a section on the way people ought to live at different times of the year. In winter for example, you should eat a lot and drink

little. Drink your wine as undiluted as possible, eat bread, grilled meat and few vegetables. In summer, eat porridge instead of bread, eat raw and cooked vegetables and boiled meat, and drink plenty of well-diluted wine. The theory was that the seasons affected the human constitution, and the right diet could neutralize ill-effects by keeping the body warm and dry in winter and cool and moist in summer.

In the same common-sense vein, there is an interesting passage on weight watching:

- *Fat people who want to reduce should take their exercise on an empty stomach and sit down to their food out of breath. They should not wait to recover their breath. They should before eating drink some diluted wine, not too cold, and their meat should be dished up with sesame seeds or seasoning and suchlike things.*

Quite a detailed picture of ancient Greek society emerges from such writings. Eating habits were generally frugal by modern standards. Two meals a day, with the main meal in the evening before sunset, were enough even for the rich. Wheat-flour or oatmeal cakes baked in the oven were the staple food of every household. Fruit and vegetables were abundant during warm weather and onions were eaten throughout the year. Fish was eaten by both rich and poor and salted or smoked products could be preserved or imported. Meat and poultry, frequently mentioned in the writings of the physicians, were not cheap, and rarely appeared on the tables of the poor. Most Greeks had a sweet tooth, and the famous Attic honey was used for preparing a wide variety of cakes and medicines.

Though there were banquets and symposia (originally a symposium was a drinking-party with philosophical conversation), daily life in Athens remained simple throughout the

Golden Age, probably for as long as people were capable of producing works of great artistic and spiritual value. Luxury is generally the sign of a decadent culture, whose apparently brilliant façade conceals the emptiness of the dominant class.

Environment

A section of the works of Hippocrates is entitled *Airs, Waters, Places*. It shows the great importance attached by physicians to the location of dwellings, the winds to which they were exposed, proximity to the sea, rivers or marshes, and the quality of the water available to the population.

- *Whoever would study medicine aright must learn of the following subjects. First he must consider the effect of each of the seasons of the year and the differences between them. Secondly he must study the warm and cold winds, both those which are common to every country and those peculiar to a particular locality... The effect of any town upon the health of its population varies according as it faces north or south, east or west.*

Hippocrates bore these considerations in mind when he chose the site for his general hospital, the "Asclepion".

On water quality we find:

- *Water plays a most important part in health. Stagnant water from marshes and lakes will necessarily be warm, thick and of an unpleasant smell in summer... Thus it is coloured, harmful and productive of biliousness. In winter it will be cold and... productive of hoarseness. During the summer there is much dysentery and diarrhoea together with prolonged quartan fevers (malaria).*

- *The best water comes from high ground and hills covered with earth. This is sweet and clean... cool in summer and warm in winter because it comes from very deep springs...*

His relevance for today

Hippocrates left his mark on the course of history and a great deal can be learnt by studying his works and following his example. Many of the teachings attributed to him may have been written by his disciples, but they are none the less significant because they are based on his method and describe the different procedures used for treating diseases. Perhaps most importantly, he was the first known practitioner to adopt a rational method in diagnosis and therapy, which subsequently developed into the scientific method of today. In his time medicine was practised by priests and was seen more or less as a magical art.

Hippocrates knew that as long as the art of medicine was kept secret it could make no real progress or offer any real benefit for humanity. He was the first to make the precious gift of medicine available to all by publicizing all the aspects which were at that time kept secret, and establishing clinical practice based on human values. Physicians in subsequent centuries followed his example and developed his methods and theories. In the first century AD, Galen in Greece and Celsus in Rome were popularly known as "the second Hippocrates" and "the Roman Hippocrates" respectively. In the tenth century Avicenna was called "the Persian Hippocrates", in the seventeenth Sydenham was called "the English Hippocrates", and in the nineteenth Laennec was called "the French Hippocrates". Even in our own century Osler was known as "the Canadian Hippocrates".

It could be said that the World Health Organization's strategy of health for all by the year 2000 is a logical continuation of Hippocrates' work. It is now generally recognized that this is a gradual process of improving people's

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health. It needs to be interpreted and adapted differently in each country in the light of local social, economic and political conditions and the state of its health services. It involves doing whatever is necessary to ensure that essential care is available to every individual and every family. It implies that all people should have a level of health that enables them to lead a socially and economically productive life.

It does not mean that by the year 2000 physicians, nurses and other health personnel will be able to meet all needs, or that no one will be ill or handicapped. It does mean that people will be better able to avoid disease and prevent disabilities, and have a better chance of growing up, aging and dying without unnecessary suffering. And it does mean that there will be a fairer distribution of the resources available for health. Finally, it means that people will realize that they have the power to fashion their own lives and that the impairment of health is not their inescapable destiny. These are aims that Hippocrates would have wholeheartedly endorsed. ■

Editor's Note

The quotations of Hippocratic material in this article are taken from *Hippocratic writings* edited by G.E.R. Lloyd, Penguin Books, 1978.

Hippocrates of Kos, also known as Hippocrates II, was a Greek physician of the Age of Pericles (Classical Greece), who is considered one of the most outstanding figures in the history of medicine. He is often referred to as the "Father of Medicine" in recognition of his lasting contributions to the field as the founder of the Hippocratic School of Medicine. This intellectual school revolutionized medicine in ancient Greece, establishing it as a discipline distinct from other fields with which it had