

# Medicine in Stamps

## Hippocrates: Father of Medicine

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Modern medicine originated in Greece some 2,500 years ago with a man named Hippocrates, frequently portrayed as a bearded and bald sage believed to have lived to over 100 years. Born on the Greek island of Cos around 460 BC, Hippocrates practised in a medical environment shrouded in ignorance, superstition and mythology. Early Greek medicine centred on the supernatural. Apollo was the Greek god of health, who taught the healing art to Chiron, a centaur (a mythical half-horse, half-man species) who later became the god of surgery. Chiron in turn taught Apollo's most famous son Aesculapius, who thereafter came to dominate the mythology of Greek medicine. Apollo's first healing temple on earth was initially at Delphi, but later, additional temples were erected. There, in an ambience of sanctity and awe, the sick gathered for spiritual healing. They would sleep over to hopefully benefit from miraculous cures that were based on god-given visions called oracles. Temple priests with their sacred snakes that licked the patient's wounds (the origin of the caduceus – the staff and snake symbol of the medical profession) interpreted these oracles, prescribing therapy that generally consisted of diet, exercise or purging.

Although Greek culture at the time subscribed to rational and reasonable rules and believed in the power of nature, it was left to Hippocrates to enunciate and apply these principles to human disease. Hippocrates forever changed the art of medical diagnosis by replacing supernatural precepts with observation-based methodology. Natural, rather than supernatural causes, would henceforth explain all disease processes. The cumulative experiences gathered from careful observations also allowed the Hippocratic physicians to be the first to develop the art of medical prognosis.

To be sure, many of the diagnoses, made in a void of understanding of human anatomy and physiology,

must have been incorrect. The dissection of cadavers, for example, was forbidden, and bodily functions were believed to centre around the four humors, viz., blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. The Greeks believed that these four humors were constantly renewed by food, and that their disturbed equilibrium or harmony led to disease.

Not all of modern medicine that was divorced from sorcery and make-belief originated with Hippocrates. Half a world away in India, Ayurvedic medicine had already laid claim to the belief that diseases were associated with disturbances of various natural substances – wind (vayu), bile (pitta), phlegm (kapha) and blood (rakta). These eventually became the four humors of Greek medicine. And ancient Chinese medicine, recorded in the Nei Ching in 400 BC, described acupuncture points, meridians, flow of chi, moxibustion, herbal therapy and the twelve pulses at the wrist.

Surprisingly little is known of Hippocrates, the man called “the totem of medicine.” Some of the teachings and writings attributed to him may have come from others. Legend has it that he learned medicine from his father, that he was a former librarian, and like most itinerant physicians in his day, he travelled from place to place to ply his trade. He taught as he practised, gathered a following of Hippocratic physicians, and left a legacy preserved in the Hippocratic Corpus, a collection of some seventy texts written in the Ionian dialect.

The followers of Hippocrates understood well the influence of the environment and other external influences on the patient's well-being. They recognised the limitation of their profession, fondly referred to as the Art – hence *Primum non nocere* (First, do no harm). Their humility is best captured by the Hippocratic proverb: “Life is short, the Art is long, opportunity fleeting, experience delusive, judgment difficult.”

Apart from the science of medicine, Hippocrates emphasised the care of the whole patient, in contrast



to a competing but less successful school of medicine in his days, the Cnidian school that focused on the disease itself. Hippocrates had exhorted that the physician should add a love of humanity to the love of his profession. Even in ancient times, this holistic, patient-oriented approach was the more triumphant, a forerunner to Dr. Peabody's 20<sup>th</sup> century admonition that "the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient." Hippocrates himself said it as eloquently: "Some patients, though conscious that their condition is perilous, recover their health simply through their contentment with the goodness of the physician."

Hippocrates is undoubtedly best known for his teachings on ethics, although his was not the first attempt to codify professional conduct. About

1,300 years prior, the Babylonian king, Hammurabi, handed down the first written law-code that promulgated certain rules governing medical conduct. But they did not endure; one particularly harsh edict commanded that physicians be paid so many shekels for opening an abscess and saving the eye of a patient, but if he should kill the patient or cause him to go blind, then his hands should be cut off.

The Hippocratic oath is still revered today as the ethical code of professional conduct expected of doctors, and is recited by all graduating medical students. Notwithstanding some modern-day modifications, the oath retains the two broad categories of the original version: the first, on physician obligation towards teaching; and the second, on the doctor's ethical conduct towards patients.

## HIPPOCRATIC OATH

I swear by Apollo the physician, and Aesculapius, Hygeia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses, that, according to my ability and judgment, I will keep this Oath and this covenant:

To reckon him who taught me this Art equally dear to me as my parents, to share my substance with him and relieve his necessities if required; to look upon his offspring on the same footing as my own brothers and to teach them this Art, if they shall wish to learn it, without fee or stipulation; and that by precept, lecture and every other mode of instruction, I will impart a knowledge of the Art to my own sons and those of my teachers and to disciples who have signed the covenant and have taken an oath according to the law of medicine but no one else.

I shall follow that system of regimen which, according to my ability and judgment, I consider for the benefit of my patients and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous.

I shall give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel; and in like manner I will not give to a woman an abortive remedy. With purity and with holiness I will pass my life and practise my Art.

I will not cut persons labouring under the stone, but will leave this to be done by such men as are practitioners of this work.

Into whatever houses I enter, I will go into them for the benefit of the sick, and will abstain from every voluntary act of mischief and corruption; and further from the seduction of females or males or freemen and slaves.

Whatever, in connection with my professional practice, or not in connection with it, I see or hear in the life of men which ought not to be spoken of abroad, I will not divulge as reckoning that all such should be kept secret.

While I continue to keep this Oath unviolated, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and practice of the Art, respected by all men, in all time. But should I trespass and violate this Oath, may the reverse be my lot.