

The Cult of Asclepius – The Temples of Medicine

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Abstract

Medical practice has evolved over the centuries, though some principles remain relevant today. The author reviews some details of the medical practices of the Greek temples of Asclepius,

precursors of hospitals in Europe.

Key words: Asclepius, Sanctuary at Cos, Greek medicine.

The Hospitals of Europe have their origins in the temples of Asclepius – Asclepieions - in Greece of the 7th Century BC, where the sick went on pilgrimages to consult with the God, in the hope of curing their ailments.

There are three key stages in the History of Medicine in Greece: the primitive stage (up until 1184 BC), the second stage, associated with religion (up until 500 BC) and the third stage, related to philosophy (up until 320 BC).¹

The cult of Asclepius began in Thessaly and expanded into all the countries inhabited by Greeks. Temples were built in honor of Asclepius, close to springs with curing properties, or on high mountain tops and other sacred places. There are more than 320 sanctuaries, the most well-known of which are those at Epidaurus and of Cos.

Physicians, in the sense of people that attempt to cure bodily ailments, are almost as ancient as humankind itself. The oldest practices in medicine are common to all peoples. The roles of the priest and medicine man were attributed to a single person, and magic was invoked as an alternative to knowledge. The high priests or Asclepiades (a designation applied to those that claimed to be descendants of Asclepius, or those that felt inspired by him), who served the temples, held the monopoly over medical and religious science at that time.

It is understood that from a certain point in time, these places also began to function as schools. Knowledge was initially transmitted from father for son, and foreigners were only admitted at a later stage. There

are many sanctuaries/schools, but that of Epidaurus is by far the most well-known. We know, from Plato, that the most eminent personality of the School, although not its founder, was Hypocrates (born in Cos around 460 BC, he was the 18th descendant of Asclepius on the paternal side and a descendant of Hercules on the maternal side).

The sanctuaries formed a meeting place for countless healers and soothsayers, as well as their apprentices, who sold medications or performed simple surgical operations.^{2,3}

There is no doubt that marvelous cures were performed in the temples. It was magic, therapeutics and religion all rolled into one. Mental suggestion was often used, while patients were put to sleep and their cure revealed in dreams, interpreted by the high priests.

There were scores of patients from all social classes, mainly women that consulted the god for a wide variety of cases, from extremely serious to insignificant.

To guard against possible failure of the god, before admission, patients underwent stringent preliminary examinations, and if they proved to be too sick, they were not allowed into the temple. Pregnant women and the terminally ill were not allowed to enter the sanctuaries either.

If the cure was not accomplished, it was the patient's faith that was put in doubt, not the power of the god or the skills of the Asclepiades, so that neither religion nor medical practice were exposed to discredit. None of the patients treated died in the temple, because at the first sign of imminent death the patient was abandoned in the nearby woods.³

Worship called for special rituals, and it was necessary to present oneself pure before the divinity. Offerings and animal sacrifices to the god were compulsory, especially for the wealthier clients. Non-

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Sanctuary at Cos, (image 1997.03.0156 from SHOT - site of the Classics Department at Holy Cross Faculty)

venomous snakes, worshiped as an incarnation of the god, were kept in the temples close to the altar, enjoying total freedom and being fed by the pilgrims with sacrificial cakes.

Purification of the body consisted of baths in the sanctified waters, and ointments, ingestion of pure foods, and abstinence from certain foods and drink, particularly wine.

This was followed by the reading of marble slabs fixed to the temple walls that bore the names of the patients, the diseases and the marvelous cures of Asclepius:

“Ambrosia from Athens, blind in one eye, came as a suppliant to the god but in the temple mocks his miraculous cures. Asclepius also appears to her, promising to cure her but requiring her to donate a silver pig to symbolize her foolishness. Asclepius then cuts and embalms the eye and Ambrosia leaves in the morning cured.”

“A man with an abdominal abscess dreams about his cure. It appeared to him that the god ordered his servants to tie him up and hold him fast. He tried to escape but was unable to, so they cut him up and cooked him, after which he was freed, then returned home cured...The floor of the temple was covered in blood.”^{1,2,4}

When the patients thus entered the religious/mystical atmosphere, this was followed by the most important divine action, the incubation (as they were attracted to the temples not only to receive the services of the high priests/physicians, but also in the belief of the virtuosity associated with these buildings, and therefore attempted to get as close as possible to the altar).

Pilgrims were introduced into the sacred dormi-

tory, (they took their own provisions and blankets as the temple administration only provided beds of leaves) where they were allowed to sleep for one night wrapped in the fur of a sacrificed animal. A statue of the god was placed under the bed.

They dreamt, probably drugged and under the influence of the experiences reported, concentrating on the miraculous cure. Their “cure” was stimulated by the sense of expectation and debilitated state, the pure, mild air, the propitious environment, the specific diet, the baths, the exercises, the massages, the use of mineral waters, the purgatives and sedatives, and the mental suggestion and hypnosis.

During “the dreams”, Asclepius, or more likely the priests, cured some patients. The following morning the priests interpreted the recipes of the god, which included pure air, an animated environment, temperate habits, exercise, massages, sea bathing, use of mineral waters, purgatives, emetics, and sedatives. The patients thanked Asclepius, tossing gold into the holy spring.^{1,6,7}

The services provided were not free of charge and varied according to the patients’ situation. The god was implacable with those who did not pay what they owed.

Great was the wisdom of the Greeks – a spirit of emulation prevailed, having obtained a high ethical level, as shown by the Hippocratic Oath, which is still in use today. We also continue to see patients from all social classes in the Hospitals, with a predominance of female patients at the Clinics. The power of mental suggestion is still widely used, and we continue to accomplish marvelous cures and prescribe healthy dietetic measures. ■

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