

Greek medical practice was, in the classical period, a curious blend of the scientific and the magical. Naturally, the magical element was an earlier development, and was never completely replaced in antiquity by a generally accepted rational approach to the subject. Apparently nothing persists quite so stubbornly as a hand-me-down cure for some affliction. In our own day, for instance, it is recognized by the medical profession that only time will really cure a hangover (although symptom relief is available through painkillers). Nevertheless, it seems that every curb-stone doctor has his own remedy ranging from torrents of black coffee to concoctions made of raw egg, tobasco, tomato juice and beer (none of which actually help the hangover). If the wise people of 20th century Canada can be so deluded by false cures then we must not expect more of the ancient Greeks. Canadians spend millions annually on useless patent medicines: ancient Greeks wasted thousands of drachmae on essentially the same tomfoolery.

Hippocrates of Cos, who flourished c.400 B.C., was regarded in antiquity as one of the most distinguished physicians of his time. He was not, however, the "Father of Medicine", only one of its advancers. To him are attributed a number of works entitled the Hippocratic Corpus, only some of which were actually Hippocrates'. Hippocrates taught that medicine, like architecture, painting, and sculpture, was an art learned from practice. The body was viewed as an entire organism, rather than a number of mutually supportive parts, and it was thought that disease occurred from undigested food which created gas; this bad air then attacked the body (this is an advance in thinking over earlier Babylonian theory which held demon possession responsible for ailments). Some thought that disease resulted when the four major fluids of the body, black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood were not mixed in the proper proportions. Still, a good physician of the Hippocratic school learned of the arts of prognosis, the therapeutic value of good dieting, the use of medicinal drugs, and even some surgery should all else fail. Although Greek doctors could be of high caliber and have learned their medicine either through an apprenticeship or a school, there was no licensing in the ancient world of physicians, allowing the medical quack a free range in which to practice his posturings and duplicity.

With such a wide range in the quality of their doctors and with the severe limitations of even the best of ancient medicine, it was no wonder that many turned to religion and magic for relief from disease. All gods had some healing power (Apollo, Artemis, and Hera are good examples) and even legendary

physicians, like Asclepius, were turned into healing gods after their deaths. At a temple to Asclepius an afflicted man could hope to find a miraculous cure for his affliction. Quite often a small, clay model of the diseased part of the body would be made and placed in a temple as an invocation to the god to come and heal the affected piece. Should this fail a more powerful medicine was available in "incubation". After the appropriate rites the sick worshiper was taken to a tiny cell in the temple where he fell asleep tightly curled in the foetal position, after perhaps having been given some drug to induce a restless sleep. It was essential that the temple-sleeper experience a divinely-sent dream to be advised on how to achieve a cure, or even to be cured while asleep should the god seem to appear to him and heal him. We have a dedicatory inscription of one poor man entering upon such a rite who was suffering from that terrible scourge of the male ego, baldness. He awoke to find that the god had blessed him with a fine, full head of hair.

Other magical instruments against disease such as amulets inscribed with prayers, and powerful charms and signs were used to both keep sickness away or cure a disease which was present. Naturally magic formulae, known only to certain dubious practitioners were also available for a price which their sponsors claimed to be proof against everything from toothache to gangrene. If a formula was not to your liking some herbal remedy, which at best would do you no injury, would be sold to you for your misery. All in all, it was much preferable in ancient times to stay as fit and healthy as possible with good habits of diet and exercise than to fall ill--but, of course, so it is even today!

#### THE METHODS OF HIPPOCRATES

*"We doctors base our judgments on what we know of disease generally, and of each disease in particular; on what we know of the illness we are treating, of the patient, of his treatment so far and his previous doctor. We take into account the prevailing climate, where the patient comes from, his way of life, his job, his age, his conversation, mannerisms, silences, thoughts, whether he is a good sleeper or not, his dreams--what sort they are and how often he has them--any picking or scratching, hysteria, discharges, sneezing or vomiting. We follow most carefully the way in which the illness progresses to its most acute phase, checking details like sweating, coldness, stiffness, coughing, sneezing, hiccuping, heavy breathing and internal bleeding. It is our job to pay attention to all these things and see what they lead to."*

--Hippocrates  
(trans. Nichol & McLeish)