

May I Cut In?

by L. Neuru

There is a tremendous difference between today's medical techniques and those of doctors in the Roman Empire. To begin with, no one had to go to school to learn how to become a doctor. Most doctors were trained by apprenticeship, as in most trades from weaver to politician. There were some schools where medicine was part of the curriculum, such as the university at Alexandria, perhaps the most famous medical school of all. Some doctors were simply born into a 'medical' family, specifically, a family devoted to the cult of a healing god. Aesculapius was the principal healing god of the Roman Empire, and Galen, the famous physician and medical writer of the 2nd century AD, was one example of a doctor from a medical or priestly family.

Since there were no licences granted to doctors, there was little to prevent anyone from setting out a shop-sign declaring him or herself open for medical business, or sometimes just setting up in the public baths like a hawker of pastry or sausages and providing medical services. The only way to get rid of such quacks was perhaps mob violence, but this seems not to have happened.

Comments in the ancient sources on doctors range from extremely complimentary to the opposite. The epigrammatist Martial, writing at the end of the 1st and into the 2nd century, was perhaps most vitriolic. He compared doctors to morticians, declaring there was little difference in the end result of their services. Seneca, Nero's advisor, praises the devotion to duty of his own doctor as well as his skill, while another author comments that the quality of medical services was always better for more important or wealthier patients than for slaves.

Many doctors doubtless did the very best they could in an age without proper antiseptics or medicines (both are recent innovations which in this century have radically changed medical care for the better and vastly increased the patients' chances of survival). Many other aspects of Roman medical practice have also changed, one such being the range of the doctor's instrumentarium or set of instruments. Modern methods of steel manufacture have greatly improved the cutting edges of scalpels, saws and lancets, and the strength and quality of needles,

probes, hooks, forceps, clamps and specula, which are devices for opening and viewing the insides of various bodily orifices.

Roman metal smithing was generally quite fine; the techniques had been developed by the culturally superior Etruscans, and then later adopted and improved by the Romans. The shapes of physicians' tools are usually readily identifiable to those familiar with such instruments, and the decorative touches the Roman metalsmiths added to these instruments, so plainly manufactured today, would have been quite normal to a Victorian doctor. These decorative touches could include animal heads at the ends of handles, vegetal, beaded or scrolled patterns anywhere except the blade or working edge or surface of the instrument. Iron was the metal of choice for fine and strong blades, although the handle could be of another metal, usually an alloy of copper, which gave it a bronze look. Some tools were 'steeled' for extra strength; primitive methods of steel smelting were known but don't seem to have been often used. Most tools were probably made by blade-makers, who made swords and butcher knives as well. Very few instruments have been found with makers' names on them, and so far we do not know too much about the manufacturing process or about the manufacturers themselves. Pompeii, of course, has yielded surgical instruments, and some instrumentaria have been found buried in graves, presumably with the deceased doctor.

Many individual instruments and also some instrumentaria are identifiable as belonging to a specialist physician; cataract needles would be used by the eye doctor to repair some types of cataracts; there was a whole range of ear, nose and throat 'gadgets' used to clean, inspect, and operate on tonsils, infected uvulae, infected ears and stuffy noses. There are plenty of identifiable orthopedic instruments, bone saws, pins and giant forceps. Obstetricians already had cranial forceps to use on babies being born. Almost all doctors would have had a range of scalpels, lancets and cupping instruments; these last two were very important. The lancet was used in blood-letting, a standard treatment for just about everything which lasted, incidentally, through the 19th century. If the patient bled enough, the ailment supposedly would be let out with the blood. Sometimes it was thought effective even to stop bleeding: if one had a wound in one arm which was bleeding too much, the other arm was bled, to equalize the pressure and thus stop the bleeding. Cupping was a lesser form of blood-letting: a flame was held under a cup device; when the oxygen was burned off, the cup was placed on the skin and the suction was thought to draw out the malady. What resulted was a drawing of blood and a livid bruise.