

**The Papyrus Ebers:  
The Greatest Egyptian Medical Document** by P.Y. Forsyth

The title for this article is taken from a book published in 1937, in which B. Ebbell provided an English translation of the so-called Papyrus Ebers, and dedicated his work to none other than Imhotep, the famous Egyptian physician. Whether or not the Papyrus Ebers is indeed "the greatest Egyptian medical document" I will leave to Egyptologists to decide, but it is beyond doubt fascinating reading for anyone interested in the history of medicine.

The papyrus gets its modern name from a German Egyptologist called Georg Ebers, who gained possession of it in 1873. Thought to have been discovered in a tomb in Thebes around 1860, the document originally took the form of a roll some 20.7 metres in length. Dated with a fair degree of certainty to ca. 1555 BC, it is full of remedies (876 in all) for almost every conceivable human ailment; these remedies, however, seem to reflect the medical knowledge of an even earlier age: for example, a prescription to be used when one has hair problems [did Bronze Age Egyptians have "bad hair days" ?] is said to have been developed for Shesh, the mother of the Pharaoh Teti, who is usually dated to ca. 2500 BC. It thus seems likely that many of the prescriptions/remedies recorded in the papyrus reflect the "folk medicine" of long bygone years, dutifully handed down from physician to physician.

Those looking for scientific analyses of diseases and their causes will probably be disappointed with this papyrus, which is essentially a compilation of tried-and-true remedies. However, as Ebbell states in his preface, "descriptions of diseases were not needed by the Egyptian readers; [instead] the name of the ailment was stated, and then the physician knew at once what was the matter. To adduce an example: Cough. Everybody knows what this is, so it ought not to be necessary to say anything more about it. For this reason the papyrus may, without any introduction, give directions for treating the cough, and this is done in 21 prescriptions" [page 13]. It was apparently left to the attending physician to decide which of these 21 remedies should be tried, and an intractable cough might force its wretched sufferer to try all 21 !

Besides coughs and colds, the papyrus deals with such ailments as burns and other wounds, stomach and liver problems, bites and itching, pains in muscles and nerves, toothaches and earaches, even excessive bleeding and

tumours. To treat these, and other, problems some 500 substances are recommended, often combined in specific proportions; some of these substances would not appeal much to today's patients, e.g., the excrement of such animals as panthers, gazelles, ostriches, and lions. In fact, fifty-five of the prescriptions use faeces and urine as their major components. On the other hand, it may temper one's reaction to know that beer is also a very highly recommended cure for many ailments.

Some recipes for restoring health now seem in order. Having a problem with roundworm ? Just take two measures of silphium [a plant believed to have many medicinal properties], one measure of salt, four measures of honey, mix them all together and drink. If that doesn't do the trick, try dried sycamore and fresh dates mixed with beer and drunk for four days straight. If you still have roundworm after this, try colocynth [a purgative] mixed with turpentine, grease, red natron, and the gall of an ox - all formed into a cake and eaten in one day.

Having bladder problems ? Here's a remedy for "urine which runs too often": take four measures of wheat, four measures of sebesten, one measure of yellow ochre and five measures of water; mix and let stand in the dew overnight, strain in the morning and take it for four days. An alternative is a mixture of gum, wheat, fresh porridge, yellow ochre, water and honey, also to be taken for four days.

Rheumatism in the back keeping you awake all night ? Try rubbing saffron on your back. Have a head cold ? No problem - just mix ladanum, a branch of juniper, frankincense, yellow ochre [seems to be a cure-all, doesn't it ?], the grease from an ibex, put it all in a head-fillet and apply to the head. Nasty case of shingles ? All you need is to be anointed with a burnt frog in oil. As for that cough mentioned above, one of the more enduring remedies is to make a dough out of the powder of dates and bake it over a fire; then make it into a porridge with grease and oil, and consume immediately.

Sometimes, however, more unusual measures are required, and the papyrus also contains a number of incantations designed to make evil substances leave the body. Here's a typical one - designed to cure a "fetid nose": "Flow out, fetid nose! Flow out, son of fetid nose! Flow out, thou who breakest bones, destroyest the skull, and makest the seven holes in the head ill." Clearly much more powerful than "take two aspirins and call me in the morning."

[P.S. For a brief, but very readable survey of medicine in ancient Egypt, see Carole Reeves, Egyptian Medicine (Shire 1992).]