

Medicine has a very long history: we know that successful brain operations were performed in ancient Egypt. Perhaps no figure in medical history is more famous than Hippocrates, of the Aegean island of Cos, who flourished in the Fifth Century B.C. He was a devotee of the healing god Asclepius, whose snakes are still seen on medical insignia, and the oath of Hippocrates is still taken by modern physicians. This ancient statement deserves attention.

The would-be physician swears by Apollo the Healer: he is IATROS, a healer, the same root we find in PEDIATRICS. Also invoked is Asclepius, and Health: she is Hygieia, whence comes hygiene. Then comes Asclepius' daughter Panacea, the All-Healer, and for good luck all the gods and goddesses are invoked. It is interesting to find that professional solidarity was important then as now: the first promise is to respect teacher and colleagues, and to give free instruction to their families and to registered medical students and to nobody else. The next section is on medical ethics, and the promise is to help the sick according to ability and judgment but never to harm, to administer poison or to cause an abortion. Sexual abuse of man or woman, slave or free, must be avoided. Finally, whatever is learned either in professional practice or elsewhere is not to be repeated but considered a holy secret.

A considerable number of writings said to be by Hippocrates has come down to us. Analysis shows that they were not all written by the same person, but about half a dozen of them do seem to be the work of a single mind, and they form an intellectual treasure. Probably, though not certainly, the treatise On the Sacred Disease directly reflects the thought of the great physician.

The opening sentences show that scientific thinking did not begin in modern times. "I am about to discuss the disease called 'sacred'. It is not, in my opinion, any more divine or more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause, and its supposed divine origin is due to men's inexperience, and to their wonder at its peculiar character." The disease which the Greeks generally termed Sacred seems to be what we call epilepsy, although other types of seizures may well be included. In popular thought such seizures were caused by the gods, and could be averted only, if at all, by ritual purifications and magic. Hippocrates dismisses this as bad science and bad religion: if diseases can be cured by such means, they could also be produced in a similar way, and if so the agency of godhead is disproved. He goes on to say that a man's body is not defiled by a god, the one being utterly corrupt and the other perfectly holy. No: this disease like all others has a natural cause. Yet it would be wrong and unscientific to divide reality between the natural and the divine, for nature itself is ultimately divine, and all phenomena are both at once. The treatise goes on at some length to discuss the origin of the disease in heredity, and to describe the structure of the brain. The details are not relevant here, but the translator's comment may be appropriate. "... little by little the grandeur of the main theme, the uniformity of Nature, every aspect of which is equally divine, grips the attention. We realize that we are in contact with a great mind ..."

Note: the main Hippocratic works may be found in four volumes of the Loeb Classical Library, with translation and comments by W.H.S. Jones. The oath is in Volume I, and On the Sacred Disease is in Volume II. The quotations in the article are from his translation.