

ANCIENT GREECE

Background Information 12: Medicine

Religion and Medicine

Religion and supernatural causes were linked to beliefs about the causes and cures of disease. Religious healing was an ever present alternative that was sought particularly in chronic cases eg: the epidemic that affected Athens in 430 – 427 BC helped spread the worship of **Asklepios**.

In Hesiod's poetry (c. 750BC), diseases mark the end of the Golden Age. They were created because of Zeus' anger against Prometheus; and are released from Pandora's box.

Asklepios

- Widely worshipped as a god of healing.
- In legend Asklepios was the son of the god Apollo by a human mother (Apollo was also a god of healing – he causes a plague at the beginning of the Iliad).
- By the end of the 5th century BC he had become a popular god. Many temples were built in his honour.
- The main temple was at Epidaurus. Ill people stayed overnight there, if lucky they would have a dream in which Asklepios would offer medical advice. These dreams could be interpreted by on site healers.
- Asklepios is often symbolised holding a staff with a snake coiled around it. The snake became a symbol of the art of medicine – its ability to renew itself by shedding its skin was associated with immortality.

Hippocrates

- He is known as the 'Father of Medicine' but very little information known about the historical Hippocrates.
- A Hippocrates is described in Plato's Protagoras as coming 'from Kos and charging a fee for teaching people medicine.'
- Kos was famous for its doctors.
- In Phaedrus Plato links Hippocrates' family tree back to Asklepios.

The Hippocratic Corpus.

These are a set of texts that date from 420 – 370BC. Attributed to Hippocrates – but in most cases this is wrong. This collection was brought together in the library of Alexandria in around the beginning of the 3rd century BC.

Hippocratic Medicine

Hippocratic medicine is easier to characterise – a description of it will normally include the following:

1. Close observation of symptoms
2. An openness to ideas from all sides.
3. A willingness to explain the causes of diseases.

The Hippocratic oath is another element which has become associated with Hippocratic medicine (still used to this day).

"... I will use my power to help the sick to the best of my ability and judgement; I will abstain from harming or wronging any man by it...

... I will not give a fatal draught to anyone if I am asked, nor will I suggest any such thing...
... Whatever I see or hear, professionally or privately, which ought not to be divulged, I will keep secret and tell no one."

Most Hippocratic texts presented fluids in the body as the main cause of disease.

The four humours

The body was viewed as inherently unstable; lack of balance could cause disease. Two fluids were singled out for special concern – bile and phlegm.

The mind was also affected by these fluids – phlegm caused epilepsy, bile caused frenzy.

Through time it was believed that the levels of four different fluids affected your body:

- yellow bile
- phlegm
- blood
- black bile (or melancholy)

The system of the four humours was extended to cover the four elements, the four seasons, the four qualities (hot, cold, wet and dry), the four ages of man; the 4 mental states or temperaments.

It showed how man, in sickness and in health, related to the cosmos, and how the cosmos and the man's actions could affect his health.