

We Get Letters & E-Mail

Editorial Staff

Who Was the Real "Father of Medicine"?

Dear Editor:

I would like to comment Dr. Amaro on his series "The Caduceus, Chakras, Acupuncture and Healing." They were quite interesting and informative. However, I would like to comment on the all-too-frequent historical omission with regard to the ancient Greeks and their contribution to medicine. We know that all cultures borrow and modify from other cultures, but it is rare that any acknowledgement is ever given to those from whom the ancient Greeks borrowed, especially as far as medical knowledge is concerned. Most textbooks teach that Western civilization, including early medical science, originated in Greece, and so Hippocrates is usually referred to as "The Father of Medicine," as Dr. Amaro did in the first part of his series. In the second part, he stated: "As the Arabs conquered the Mediterranean, what they gathered from the Greeks became a vital part of the medicine and philosophy of the Middle East."

I would just like to make the point that Hippocrates in particular, and the ancient Greeks in general, borrowed heavily from the Egyptian civilization, which was the most advanced and sophisticated of its kind in the ancient world. Let us first look at Hippocrates. He lived in the fifth century B.C., certainly was a physician who taught others the healing arts, and indeed was a member of the "cult" of Aesculapius. However, if anyone deserves the title "The Father of Medicine," it would have to be Imhotep, the Egyptian priest/physician who lived in the 3rd Dynasty and was revered for his scholarship and healing skills. He wrote volumes on the allopathic, homeopathic and naturopathic use of medicinal herbs, as well as on other subjects. He drew upon a vast legacy of medical knowledge that was revealed to the modern world in 1930, when J.H. Breasted translated a medical document known as the Edwin Smith papyrus, whose original predated Hippocrates by 2,500 years: "The diagnostic, prognostic, and therapeutic methodology revealed in the document demonstrated that even in our own day, our physicians have not surpassed the clinical acumen of the priest-physicians of the Nile Valley of whom Imhotep was the epitome."¹

[...] Because of the translations of the Smith papyrus (and others), we know that what is often passed on as Hippocratic medical insights is a direct borrowing from the theory and practice of ancient Egyptian medicine. It is this fact that should become common knowledge because it merely broadens the picture of the intercultural exchanges of medical knowledge in the ancient world. Finally, it is not the ancient Greeks who are to blame for these historical omissions, but rather contemporary writers, who unwittingly or otherwise continue to perpetuate the resultant myth that no scientific or medical knowledge ever came out of Africa.

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Notes

1. Finch CS. *The African Background to Medical Science*. London: Karnak House, 1990, p. 75.

Other References

1. Ghalioungui P. *The House of Life: Magic and Medical Science in Ancient Egypt*. Amsterdam: B.M. Israel, 1973.
 2. Hawkes J. *The World of the Past*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963.
 3. Hurry JB. *Imhoryp*. New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1978.
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Kudos to Dr. Victorio

Dear Editor:

Thank you for the update on my friend and former classmate, Dr. Raymond Victorio, president of AIC Berkeley. Raymond and I studied and later worked together in Orlando, Fla. How nice to pick up the paper and see his (always) smiling face and read about his current successes!

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