MEDICINE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

From the Period of the Old Kingdom to the New Kingdom (c. 2575-1070 B.C.)

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INTRODUCTION

“In Egypt men are more skilled in medicine than any of mankind”

• The hidden medical skills of ancient Egyptians
• Unknown to the last century

From Old Kingdom to Middle Kingdom
(2575-1070B.C)
INTRODUCTION

• Advent of Medicine in ancient Egypt
• The Medical Papyri
• Important aspects of ancient Egyptian medicine:
  - Concepts of Anatomy and Physiology
  - Magic in Egyptian medicine
  - The Holistic Healers
  - Pattern of Disease in Egypt
  - The Surgeons Role
  - Drugs for Therapy
ADVENT OF EGYPTIAN MEDICINE

• The Badarian age (4000 B.C)-beginning of medicine in Egypt

• Use of malachite for parasitic eye disease

• Advances in Egyptian medicine between Old Kingdom and New Kingdom period
THE MEDICAL PAPYRI

• The first medical texts, date from late 12th Dynasty to 20th Dynasty (2000-1090 B.C.)

• Seven medical papyri:
  • The Kahun Gynecological Papyrus
  • The Ebers Papyrus
  • The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus
  • The Hearst
  • The Chester
  • The Berlin
  • The London
KEY MEDICAL PAPYRI

• The Kahun (1825 B.C) - gynecology
• The Ebers (1534 B.C?) - internal medicine
• The Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus (1600 B.C) - surgical wounds and fractures

The Ebers papyrus (top) and Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus (bottom)
CONCEPTS OF ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY

• Understanding of gross anatomy and physiology
  - Mummification
  - Autopsies of mummies
  - Dissection of animals
CONCEPTS OF ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY

• Terms for external body parts
• Studies of battlefield injuries

Hieroglyphic terms for face

Perforated skull of pharaoh Seqenera
THE METU

• Heart as key to concepts of anatomy and physiology
• The metu—essential to life and health
• Imbalances within metu as cause of pain and illness
• The whdw and its origination
• Other causes of illness and disease
MAGIC AND MEDICINE IN EGYPT

- Integration of magic in medicine
- Amulets
- Gods of medicine and healing

- Amulet to ward off disease
- Isis
- Horus guardian of health
EGYPTIAN PHYSICIANS OR HEALERS
A combination of science, medicine and religion

• Physicians of ancient Egypt
  1) swnw → imy-r-swnw → wr swnw → smsw swnw → shd swnw → overseer of physicians
  2) sau-magician physicians
  3) physician priests of Sekmet
THE HOLISTIC HEALERS AND THEIR TRAINING

• Medical Institutions: per-ankh - Sais, Bubastis, Abydos, Edfu and Tell el-Armana

• Women physicians and Peseshet (the oldest woman physician, 4th dynasty)

• Specialization of field in the Old Kingdom and the Late Period

Map of Ancient Egypt
Hesrye—the first “chief tooth physician.”

- Other specialists
- Physicians held in high esteem
• Imhotep, a physician who became a deified god

Tomb complex of Zoser-
Egyptian god of healing

Imhotep
c. 2600 B.C.
PATTERN OF DISEASE

• Diseases commonly effecting Egyptians

• Parasitic Diseases
  - found in the mummy of Nakht

• Bacterial and Viral Infections
  Tuberculosis
  - found in the spine of Nesparehan, a priest in 21st Dynasty
  - hump-backed individuals in pre-dynastic period
  - bas-relief painting from serving girl with hump-backed
PATTERN OF DISEASES

Poliomyelitis or polio

Mummy and clubfoot of 19th Dynasty Pharaoh Siptah (c. 1300 B.C.)

Clubfoot of King Siptah (above) and deformed foot of Roma (right)

Young man with withered leg characteristic of polio (c. 1580-1350 B.C., 18th dynasty)
Small pox

Mummy of Ramses V (c. 1160 B.C.)

- Diseases of the eye - Trachoma, Distortion of the eyelid
- Night blindness - cured with roasted and crushed ox liver
- Cataracts - treated with a mixture of tortoise brain and honey
Focus on remedies for intestinal ailments

1) Intestinal ailments
   -cure for constipation

   "Berries of castor oil tree, chew and swallow down with beer in order to clear out all that is in the body."

If not effective, than add

   "1/4 leaves of castor oil, 5/6 dates of male palm, 1/16 Cyperus grass, 1/16 stalk of Poppy plant, 1/16 Coriander, 1/2 cold beer"

   -keep moist, strain, and take for four days
Diarrhea was stopped by

“1/8 green onions, 1/8 freshly cooked Gruel, 1/4 oil and honey
1/16 wax, 1/3 water, cook and take for four days.”

For A Cough

“inhalation of honey, cream, milk, carob, colocynth and date kernels.”

Migraines

fish Siluris (an electric cat fish) in fat and oil

Joint Pain

treated with ointments containing fat, oil bone marrow, gum or
honey as a base. Added flour, natron, onion, cumin, flax, frankincense or pine

•Heart attack and treatment
SURGERY IN ANCIENT EGYPT

- First surgeons in history
- Surgical tools used by ancient Egyptians
- First circumcision scene—shown carved on the wall of 6th Dynasty painting:

The circumcision scene in the Old Kingdom mastaba of Ankh-ma-hor
Wall of Twin Temple of Kom Ombro on Nile showing surgical instruments, queen in labor and obstetric chair
SURGERY

• Other surgeries performed in ancient Egypt

• Treatment for gaping wound in the head penetrating to the bone and perforating the skull

  “hast it stitched, thou shouldst lay fresh meat upon his wound the first day. Thou shouldst not bind it. Moor as his injury passes by. Thou shouldst treat it afterward with grease, honey, and lint everyday, until he recovers.”

• No treatment for cancer

• Anesthesia and antiseptic use during surgery

FRACTURES

Use of splint
• Rational medicinal treatments and techniques combined with the use of magic

• The “hidden diseases”

• Spells and incantations used for snake bites, scorpion bites, when applying a remedy to a wound, loosening bandages, drinking a remedy, or as a charm to dispel blood

“I have come from Heliopolis with the old ones in the temple, the possessors of protection, the rulers of eternity; assuredly, I have come from Sais with the mother of the gods. They have given me their protection. I have formulas composed by the lord of the universe in order to expel afflictions caused by a god or goddess, by dead man or dead woman, etc.”
DRUG THERAPY

• Combination of pharmacology and magic
  “to balance the metu”

• Drugs from plant, mineral and animal kingdom

• Dosage very specific as well as the drug prescription

• Why honey as main ingredient?

• Other drugs available
CONCLUSION

*The medicinal skills of ancient Egyptians were far beyond their time. With the writing of the first medical texts, performance of the first surgical techniques, use of the first splints and bandages, the first drug therapies, and the first medical dictionary, the ancient Egyptians revolutionized the world of medicine and laid a path and framework for the advances in medicine that exist in our world today.*

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