

REVIEW ARTICLE :

History of Medicine-1

As the history of the beginning of mankind is unknown, so is the history of medicine. According to the zoologists, the first evidence of the existence of man was found in the caves of France. They came from north Africa who were known as reindeerman. They are now known as Cro-Magnon men because their remains were first discovered in the Cro-Magnon caves of Dordogne, France.

In one of the cave of Arlege in France, there are a few pre-historic pictures of man - the picture of a Cro-Magnon medicine man. Our story begins with this man, as here we get the earliest record of a medicine man. We know nothing about his activities because there was no writing at that time. But we can visualise that this medicine man was the source of solace and guidance for his men in disease and calamity.

However, these medicine men were ignorant sorcerers. They evolved many false theories but for that they should not be ridiculed. We know that the theory of 'Aura Seminalis' of Harvey¹ and the theory of 'spontaneous generation' of Fairbrother² are nonsense, yet we respect these scientists for their honest intention to discover the truth. If the Muslim scientists would care to study the scientific verses of the Holy Qur'an (23:12-14 and 33:13), they could come to correct mechanism of human reproduction centuries before.

The pre-historic doctors discovered many drugs most of which were useless. But the early historic scientists also prescribed many useless drugs. In the 17th century, "The father of modern chemistry" — Robert Boyle included in his pharmacopla, ground up sole of a well worn shoe for the treatment of stomach pain.

No record of history of medicine is available until around 3000 B.C. or about 5000 years ago.

Egyptian calendar was based on dynasty not any date. During the rule of king Zoser (about 2900-2800 B.C) of the 3rd dynasty we come across the First physician of the world - IMHOTEP, meaning "He who cometh in peace", an appropriate title for a physician. So, about 4800 years ago the world saw the first physician of the world in Egypt.³

First Physician of the world : IMHOTEP

He was the son of an architect who was a master builder. His knowledge of building engineering obtained from his father was his first education. He was associated with the study of astronomy which made him a reputed mathematician. It is believed that he was one of the earliest writers of the world and was renowned scribe of Egypt. Imhotep then became the high priest and the Grand Vizier of the royal court.

Besides, he was the Chief magician and hence the physician because like the Cro-magnon people the ancient Egyptians also regarded the magicians and sorcerers as physicians. Moreover, these physicians were priests supposed to possess much spiritual power! People believed that the disease was caused by the influence of evil spirit, so priest were the most suitable persons to fight against disease. In this connection it may be mentioned that in the courts of old Egyptian Pharaohs, magicians and sorcerers played vital roles. We find in the Holy Quran (XX, 57-73) the fight between prophet Moses (A.S.) and the sorcerers of Pharaoh's court with magic. We do not know which Pharaoh is this but there

is no doubt that our-Imhotep was such a magician in the court of king Zoser. His influence in the court can well be imagined by the many titles bestowed upon him by the Royal Decree. All his titles put together will be "Imhotep the Chief Judge, Overseer of the King's records, Bearer of the Royal Seal, Chief of all the works of the king, the Supervisor of that which heaven brings, the Earth creates, and the Nile brings; and the Supervisor of everything in this entire land." In spite of such a high position and power, according to the available records he was a man of unstained character.

Very little is known about his activity as a physician though we know much more about his other works. His most important work was the building of the oldest (not the biggest) pyramid at modern Sakkarah near the ruins of old Memphis. His successor Cheops built the great pyramid of Ghiza during the Fourth Dynasty. This Imhotep is older than the Sphinx- the stone portrait of Chepren king.

The pyramid of Sakkarah was constructed upon the grave of his master king Zoser. "Deep to the royal tomb are a series of under ground store rooms cut in solid rocks, filled with fruits and grain in baskets sealed with clay on the sealings of which the royal name of Zoser can be read. These funeral offerings have lain there with their unbroken seals for close on 5000 years! (Said 1959)."⁴ Imhotep was buried near the city of Memphis but his grave has not yet been discovered. All the above informations were obtained from inscriptions found in the pyramids. It is probable that when his tomb will be discovered much more of his activities as physician may be known and his claim of being the first physician of the world may be confirmed. Some of the medical treatises or papyri are ascribed to his authority but nothing is definitely known as yet.

After death his reputation continued to grow and temples were raised in his honour. Three temples were built in his honour at Memphis, Thebes and Philae (Weigall, 1913).⁵ The first two have been destroyed and only the last one survived in the island of Philae far up the Nile but has now been submerged due to the construction of Asuan dam near it. In these temples which were like rudimentary hospitals, patients used to come to worship Imhotep and pray to him for their cure.

During the Great XVIII Dynasty (1500 B.C) a special rite became popular among the citizens of the new capital of Thebes, to pour libation out of their water-bowls, 'to that most famous scribe, Imhotep'.

About 2000 years after his death at about the time of king Nebu-Chadnessar of the Old Testament, Imhotep was deified as a god. This was an unique honour for any non-royal personage of ancient Egypt. He was worshiped in Egypt till 400 A.D. At about 500 B.C (2500 years after his death) when the Persians invaded Egypt, Imhotep had become recognised as the god of Medicine having equal ranks with 'Path and Sekhmet' the two other gods of Memphis. After the conquest by Alexandrian Greeks, his name was changed to Greek word Imouthes and used to be regarded equally with the Greek healing deity Asklepios. This shows the immense prestige he held even outside Egypt.

From the different treatises named after the discoverers many informations are available. From the Edwin-Smith Papyrus (1700 B.C.) it is found that in the temples of Imhotep, the priests used to work their healing magic in the name of their god Imhotep and prescribe different remedies. The Edwin Smith Papyrus described, "forty eight injuries, wounds and broken bones, together with the treatment given and the magic formula used." These papyri were the first written records of medicine-The First Medical Books. (Haggard, 1934)⁶

Sekhet' Enanach

Withington (1894)⁷ thinks that the First Physician of the world was Sekhet' Enanach who was the chief magician, hence physician of a pharaoh at about 3000 B.C. Sekhet was about 100 years Senior to Imhotep.

His picture was found in his tomb dressed in leopard skin with two sceptres in his hands. His wife stands behind resting her two hands on his shoulder. From the stone records it has been deciphered that he cured the nasal ailment of his king, for which the king being satisfied asked Sekhet to express his desire as to what reward he wanted. From this we may say that Rhinology is the oldest medical branch in record. Sekhet' Enanach instead of asking any material or reward, he chose to have his portrait curved in stone, together with a record of the case and suggested that this should be set up in a prominent position in the palace, and should afterwards mark his tomb (Guest 1926).⁸ From the above observation; sekhet' enanach may be regarded as the First Medical man. But the majority of the authorities on the subject regard his successor Imhotep as the First Physician of the world. Osler (1922) states that Imhotep was the first figure of a physician to emerge from the mist of antiquity. In fact Sekhet is more similar to the Cro-Magnon medicine man as both used to appear in animal skin and simulate the present day witch doctors of the jungle. But Imhotep was quite different from them and may be regarded as a true physician of that period. It is a fact that we still know very little about his prowess as a physician but comparatively more is known about the less renowned Sekhet' Enanach (Guthrie, 1945).⁹ On the other hand some authority (Hurry, 1928)¹⁰ suggests that Imhotep should be regarded as the Father of Medicine instead of Hippocrates. But with our limited knowledge about Imhotep, it will be unwise to dislodge the first truly Scientific Medical man Hippocrates, though when everything will be known about Imhotep the situation may then change. So Douglas Guthrie suggests that Hippocrates must remain as the Father of medicine and Imhotep the First Physician who came in peace and showed the way as he was the first medical man whose name we know. Further research should be made to confirm the claim of Hippocrates and I think we should keep our minds open about it.

For the present we may safely regard IMHOTEP as the first Physician of the World.

References

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