

# Papyrus as a Source of Medical Knowledge

By

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Among all sources of medical knowledge, writings on papyrus lend a great deal of information as compared with non graphic material discovered in archaeological excavations. Contents and style point to the existence of centres for learning similar to present universities and academies. Undoubtedly; these centres were in temples where other branches of science developed and flourished as well.

Egyptian medical papyri differ in date, length and subject. However, there are close similarities in some instances. There is a system of classification resembling that used in present textbooks of medicine. Subjects dealt with are: internal medicine, surgery, orthopaedics, gynecology, ophthalmology, pediatrics dermatology and traumatology. There is evidence of using psychic ways of treatment most probably in cases where sometime pathology is excluded. Incantations are scanned in special tones to relieve such cases, either preparatory as in combination with other lines of treatment. It is not my intention to enter into details of cases, but some remarks will be mentioned to demonstrate the efficiency of the ancients in dealing with various diseases care was taken to regulate the bowels considering the alimentary tract as the main system which governs the whole organism (Ebers; cases 7-49)

Intestinal parasites were recognized and treated (Ebers 50-85). Hematuria was surely prevalent and two important recipes were prescribed in Ebers 62 and Hearst 83. Anal diseases were described and treated and here was a specialist for this organ.

Wellings of different etiology were accurately described and differentiated, and proper treatment was advised for each case (Refer to article on palaeooncology by Dr. Fawze Sweha). Fevers were not neglected for we read about by bonic plague, mumps and others. It is impossible in this short space of time to collect all items mentioned in medical papyri, but it is convenient to differentiate between true and fringe medicine, a problem which confronts scholars up to the present day. Things inexplicable by reason we call magic; however the fallacy of some prescriptions cannot be overlooked.

Specific branches of medicine are dealt with, for example eye and skin diseases, gynaecology with interesting views on fertility and sterility, pregnancy, lactation, in addition to prediction of the sex of the foetus and the viability of the newly born.

In the field of surgery, there is evidence of using different instruments for operations, as well as stitching and adhesive plaster for gaping wounds. Traumatism and burns were treated and received attention owing to their frequency.

The famous Edwin Smith papyrus offers lessons on fractures and dislocations in a systematic manner.

Therapeutics were performed in a subtle way by administration of drugs of plant, animal or mineral origin with specified dosage indicating vast experience and accuracy in prescribing medicaments. In the domain of cosmetics, there is mentioning of hair-care, including applications for falling of hair and advice for improving hair growth. Treatment of the skin, fingers, toes and nails is interesting. Skin wrinkles were attended to, and skin complexion was cared for.

The role of medical papyri extends to the Christian era up to the eighth and ninth centuries A.D. Zoega and Chassinat papyri written in Coptic deserve further study. From all this information, the significance of medical papyri as a source of knowledge in medicine can be well ascertained.

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