Hippocrates

Hippocrates epitomizes Greek Medicine of the fifth century. Described as the ‘father of medicine’ his teachings, philosophy and practice of medicine have influenced the practice of medicine through the ages. The teachings are relevant even today.

Hippocrates was born around 460 BC in the Greek island of Cos in Aegean Sea. He died around 370 BC in Thessaly. Hippocrates learnt medicine from his father Heracleides. He travelled a lot; he was an itinerant practitioner of medicine. For a long time his physical identity was not clear, until coins bearing profiles with his name were unearthed from Cos. A sculpted head found in cemetery of Ostia, which bears close resemblance is now taken to be his appearance.1,2

Corpus Hippocraticum is also called Hippocratic collection and not Hippocrates collection. This is because how much and actually which writings are of Hippocrates is not clear.1,2 It is felt that at least some of the writings were added by his disciples. There are 72 books and 59 treatises. From these documents we can discern the knowledge of anatomy, physiology, pathology, diagnosis, therapy, prognosis, surgery, mental illnesses, and obstetrics of his times and the ethics.1 On the physician he had this to say “He must know how and when to be silent and to live an ordered life, as this greatly enhances his reputation. His bearing must be that of an honest man, for this he must be towards all honest people and kindly and understanding. He must not act impulsively or hastily; he must look calm, serene, never cross, on the other hand it does not do for him to be too gay”.1

The contributions of Hippocrates to medicine can be summarized as.1,2

a. Hippocrates discarded the belief that divinity had a role in disease causation and thus brought rationality to the practice of medicine. This was a major shift in thinking. However, as was prevalent then, he believed in the four humors and their imbalance to cause diseases.

b. Hippocrates was a great teacher. His aphorisms (over 400 in number) on the art of medicine and the physician are memorable. Hippocrates emphasized (i) importance of detailed history and of observing thoroughly using the five senses, of touch, sight, hearing, smell, and taste (ii) to study the patient (as a whole) and not (just) the disease (iii) to evaluate honestly and accept failures, and (iv) to help nature in healing. He emphasized the dictum “primum non nocere” (first of all do not harm).

c. His descriptions of diseases are unsurpassed. He did not name diseases or syndromes though it is possible to recognise ‘diseases’ from his disease descriptions.

d. His most famous contribution to the practice of medicine, is the “Hippocratic Oath” the ethical code of medicine (there is some controversy about the authorship).

**Hippocrates and Rheumatology**

Rheumatic diseases are probably the best examples of his powers of observation and deduction. Gout being the best example. His aphorisms on gout are cited even today – gout never develops in men before puberty, in women before menopause, and never seen in eunuchs – though today exceptions are known. Eighteen of the aphorisms of Hippocrates refer to joint ailments, five pertaining to gout.

He (probably) described what we call today Behcet’s disease under endemic diseases – may be it was so in his times. He had also described a patient with what we today call scleroderma. Another disease description that could be attributed to Hippocrates is rheumatic fever. Hip osteoarthritis is probably referred to in his book on joints. He described sciatica, and possibly Crohn’s disease also. Some controversial descriptions credited to him are fibromyalgia and lupus erythematosus.3

One disease that Hippocrates did not describe is a disease resembling rheumatoid arthritis. Considering his exceptional powers of observation, he could not have missed it. Proof that it is a relatively new disease?

References

1. Udwadia FE, Man and Medicine. A history; Oxford University publication 2000;85-92