Medical Symbols: Part-2

Jayant Pai-Dhungat

Hermes, the messenger of Gods (Mercury) on Mount Olympus, had a magic wand called Caduceus. The rod has two snakes entwined in opposite directions, with their heads facing each other. Snakes moving about without any visible means of support or locomotion were considered to be the wisest and cleverest of all animals by ancient Greeks and Romans. It is said that Hermes found two snakes fighting, when he placed his rod in the middle and snakes entwined the rod establishing peace.

A pair of wings, in token of Hermes’s speed was attached to the staff above the snakes. This staff was a symbol of peace. Among the ancient Greeks and Romans, it became a badge of heralds and ambassadors, signifying their inviolability. It represented commerce (trade) and settlement of disputes. Similarity of Caduceus to the staff of Asclepius the healer resulted in erroneous adoption of Caduceus as a symbol of physician. US Army Medical department mistakenly adopted the rod of Hermes as its emblem in 1902 and the rod of Caduceus was attached to military uniforms; because the members of military Medical Department were non-combatants, their duty being to work for the sick and wounded. Although Caduceus is a popular symbol of medicine, premiere health organizations and regulatory bodies like WHO use and advise the correct symbol of rod of Asclepius in their logo. There is now increasing awareness and recognition that Caduceus is incorrect symbol and has no historical substantiation as emblem of medicine. API logo is basically a modified rod of Hermes, where Lamp of knowledge & wisdom replaces wings at the top of the staff, with laurel on either side of staff.

Hygeia-Goddess of Health

Hygeia was ancient Greek goddess of health. She gave her name to the philosophy of hygiene. The young goddess was daughter and chief attendant to Asclepius, the God of medicine. She was in charge of cleanliness and teaching how to live a long life (preventive medicine). Her two known sisters were Panacea (“cure all”) and Laso (Remedy) Cult of Hygeia started in Epidaurus (600s BC). Statue of Hygeia and Athena stood at the entrance of Acropolis temple.

In classical sculpture she was often shown holding or feeding a large snake in her arms (symbol of Asclepius medicine). Her other symbol is a large water basin and a snake. Statues of Hygeia were erected in all major healing centers in the temples of Asclepius. Her primary temples were in Epidaurus, Corinth, Cos and Pergamum. The cult of Hygeia spread during the 400s BC after the appearance of plague in Greece and was established in Rome in 100s CE.

Hygeia was hygiene in medicine—about maintaining wholeness of the body and keeping it fit. Hippocratic doctors from 300s CE onwards gradually formulated philosophy of hygiene; the influence of this thinking continued its rapid impact on public health reforms during last two centuries.

The Bowl of Hygeia, a bowl with serpent entwined has become international symbol of pharmacy, like staff of Asclepius is for medicine. The common attribute of healing deities is serpent with its connotations of healing, immortality and longevity.