Medical Symbols: Part-3

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Rx of Prescriptions

Rx is an abbreviation for the Latin word “Recipere” which means “Take thou”. This Latin abbreviation is completed by some statement like “ fiat mistura” which means let a mixture be made. However, Rx symbol is believed to have evolved from Egyptian mythological Eye of Horus, an ancient Egyptian symbol associated with healing power. Horus was son of Isis (mother) and Osiris. His evil uncle Seth murdered Osiris, father of Horus. Horus then battled with Seth to avenge his father’s death. During the fight, Seth plucked out Horus’s left eye and tore it apart. Thoth (God of wisdom & magic) found the eye, pieced it together and added some magic. He returned the eye to Horus, who in turn gave it to his murdered father Osiris, thereby bringing him back to life. Thus the Eye of Horus became a powerful symbol in ancient Egypt. It was worn as an amulet to ensure good health and ward off sickness.

Horus’s eye is the origin of the pharmacist’s symbol for prescription. In the days before manufactured drugs, apothecaries (who were also semi-physicians) would write out a formula for medications. They would mix up and compound ingredients to make drugs or remedies. Until 19th Century, the generally accepted distinction was between Apothecary/Pharmacist as compounder of medicines and physician as a therapist. In 1920s, 80% of prescriptions were compounds mixed in doctor’s dispensaries. In 1940s this declined to 20%, and then to 1% or less in 1970.

Ankh-Crux ansata

Ankh is ancient Egyptian hieroglyph signifying “life,” a cross surmounted by a loop and known in Latin as a crux ansata (handle-shaped, cross). As a vivifying talisman, ankh is often held or offered by gods and pharaohs. The Egyptian gods are often portrayed carrying it by the loop. The ankh appears in hands or proximity of almost every deity in the Egyptian pantheon. It appears frequently on Egyptian paintings and other arts.. Egyptians carried it as an amulet either alone or in two other hieroglyphs that mean “strength” and “health”. They were also worn for protection and for fertility. Mirrors of beaten metal were perceived as decorations. Ankh also appears on copper coins from ancient Cyprus. As a cross, it has been extensively used as a symbol of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

The ankh seems at least to be an evolved form of, or associated with the Egyptian glyph. It would seem that the ancient Egyptians called that part of the sandal glyph. However, what the sign itself represents is often disputed. For example, Sir Alan Gardiner (1957) thought that it showed a sandal strap with the loop at the top forming the strap. Initially this theory found little favor, but this interpretation has received some acceptance in the recent times. It seems likely that the loop at the top of tau cross represents the female sexual organ and tau crosses the male. For this reason the ankh is considered a symbol of life, fertility and regeneration. Ankh along with “hand mirror.” symbolized the gift of eternal life, which Gods promised to their worshippers. There are many scenes of the ankh being applied to the nostrils of the dead, to bring them back to life.

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