Hippocrates - Father of Medicine

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Hippocrates (460 B.C. 370 B.C.) was a Greek physician universally known as father of medicine. Very little is known about what he actually thought and did. Scanty information about Hippocrates is found in the writings of Aristotle and Plato. Ancient biographer of Hippocrates Soranus mentions that he was born on the island of Cos in the Aegean Sea at the beginning of eighth Olympiad. He received his first medical instructions from his father at Athens and other subjects with Democritus and Gorgias. He acquired extensive medical experience by travel and practice among the cities. Date of his death is unknown; his age is variously estimated as anywhere from 85 to 100 yrs.

Eminence of Hippocrates is three fold. He dissociated medicine from religion and philosophy, crystallised the loose knowledge of the schools into systematic science, and gave physicians the high moral inspiration and placed their dignity on the highest plane of social level. He believed that diseases were caused naturally, not because of superstition and punishment inflicted by Gods, but rather the product of environmental factors, diet and living habits. He became an ambassador for medicine against strong opposing structure of Greece; for this opposition, he even endured a prison sentence for some time.

He founded bedside methods for the study of patients with diseases, which has been the distinctive talent of all true clinicians from Sydenham to Heberden to Charcot and Osier. Fielding Garrison, an authority on medical history stated “He is, above all, the exemplar of that flexible, critical, well poised attitude of mind, ever on the lookout for sources of error, which is the very essence of the scientific spirit.

Hippocratic School achieved greater success by applying general diagnosis and passive treatment. It focussed was on patient care and prognosis, not diagnosis. It could effectively treat diseases and allowed for further development in clinical practice. He acknowledged the humoral pathology and the four humors (body fluids), attributing all diseases to the imbalance of humors. Another important concept in Hippocratic medicine was that of crisis, a point in the progression of disease at which either the illness would begin to triumph and patient could succumb to death or opposite would occur and the natural process made for recovery. Crises tended to occur on critical days, which were supposed to be on fixed time after the contraction of disease. Hippocratic medicine was kind to the patient. Treatment was gentle and emphasised keeping the patient clean. He was reluctant to administer drugs and engage in specialised treatment that might harm the patient. He categorised illnesses as acute, chronic, endemic, epidemic, and introduced the terms such as exacerbation or relapse, resolution, crises. He was first to describe clubbing of fingers in chronic suppurative, cyanotic heart diseases, lung diseases (Hippocratic fingers). He also described Hippocratic faces in prognosis.

Hippocratic Oath, a seminal document on clinical ethics of medical practice is still relevant and in use today. It is considerably modified from the original document from Hippocratic corpus. Many aphorisms are published which look like shorthand notes of a keen mind at the bedside. The following seems to stand true even after 2500 years:

“Life is short and art is long; occasions fleeting, experience fallacious and judgement difficult”