 Dioscorides, is believed to have been born in Anazarbus, Cilicia, in Asia Minor (now near Adana, Turkey), early in the first century.

He was a surgeon, who served in the Roman armies under Nero and was a contemporary of Pliny, the great alchemist.

His chief interest lay in the use of plants as a source of drugs. While serving in the Roman army and caring for the sick, he collected plants from wide areas of ancient world for preparations of his Materia Medica.

The first copy of Greek herbals was assembled in about AD 70. The manuscript was true to the designation, “materia medica”, a term introduced in medical writing by Dioscorides.

De Materia Medica was written in five volumes and this was the first systemic Pharmacopoeia. Dioscorides was an objective observer, his pharmacological details being accurate and free from superstition. It was acknowledged as an authoritative document on the subject, for 15 centuries.

Arabs preserved the work, which when translated into Latin, served as an inspiration for later botanical research. Subsequently, it was translated into most of the cultural languages of ancient and modern world. The most important codex is a 9th century manuscript existing in the National Library of Paris.

Of the vast items listed, the important ones include acacia, aconite, aloes, cannabis, cantharides, gentian, glycerrhiza, black and white Hellebore, tragacanth and more than 60 different wines. Herbs used till recently because of their specific therapeutic value, are santonin for round-worms, veratrum for hypertension, castor oil for purging and colchicum (colchicine) for gout. Dioscorides presented a number of examples of adulteration with devices for recognising such fraud.

Dioscorides, the botanist and herbalist, thus remained an ultimate authority for a millennium and a half. However, we should not overlook the voluminous glossary of materia medica, Dhanvantari - Nighantu that existed in India since Vedic period.

Aretaeus (130-200 CE)

JV Pai-Dhungat*, Falguni Parikh*
Aretaeus, a Greek was born in Cappadocia, a Roman province in Asia Minor. Records are unclear as to the precise date of his birth. He was a contemporary of Galen in the 130-200 A.D. and studied in Alexandria. Although he was a prolific writer, only a few translations of his original communications remain, De causis et signis morborum being the only available treatise.

A sound clinician, he rejected the idle speculations and superstitions and added his personal experiences and observations to the Aphorisms of Hippocrates. His school of medicine was Eclectic, which combined the best of Empiricism and Methodism. The heart was regarded as the central organ of man, the site of soul. In this, he accepted the philosophy of pneuma.

Aretaeus identified a number of diseases. He was one of the pioneers to describe the cardiac murmurs and was probably the first to practice direct auscultation of the chest. Diabetes, a Greek term signifying a siphon, was described (note the stamp background) as: “melting down of flesh and limbs in urine”. Once the disease is fully established, death rapidly supervenes. Thirst is unquenchable. Restlessness and nausea are terminal symptoms. It is more common among women. The development of dropsy and anasarca, is also identified in a diabetic (nephropathy).

His account of ominous nature of chronic cough with haemoptysis leaves little doubt that pulmonary tuberculosis (phthisis) was the morbid state. Trephine was used in the treatment of intractable epilepsy, if measures like application of heat and bleeding from forehead vein were ineffective. Mental aberrations were divided into mania, melancholia and stable insanity.

Diagnosis and treatment of Podagra (gout) was described, white hellebore, a powerful purge, was given empirically. The tale of an Olympic runner having gout, who was a victor in the game, between acute attacks, is given in this section. Endocrinology was not overlooked. A possible case of hypopituitarism was also described.

Aretaeus’ writings have meaning, in relation to practice of medicine today. A critical bedside observer, he reported morbid processes and refused useless speculations - a sound procedure from ancient Capadocia!