Claudius Galen (130-201 A.D.)

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Galen is probably the most enduring physician of the medical history. He brought science close to the medicine of ancient Greece, by introducing experimental physiology and anatomy.

Born in Pergamum, in Asia Minor (now Bergama, Turkey), he completed his education at Alexandria. His best work was in anatomy. As dissection of human body was forbidden, Galen’s work was confined to dissection of animals, mostly monkeys. Everything he observed was not applicable to human anatomy and hence it led to many erroneous conclusions. He developed an overall system of physiology, what was based to a great extent on the four basic humours. Then there was the theory of pneuma in vogue, which was a sort of spirit, inhaled into and flowed through the body mainly in arteries. Galen showed that arteries were filled with blood and not pneuma.

As an outstanding physician of Asia Minor, he was attracted to Rome, the capital of the civilised world, at the height of its glory. His remarkable skill in the diagnosis and treatment, made him most sought after physician. His reputation soon reached the ears of the emperor, Marcus Aurelius, who commanded him to serve as his personal physician and to act as an official doctor for the gladiators. Romans loved the bloody exhibition of gladiatorial combat and Galen used this position to further his anatomical studies, treating cuts, broken limbs and torn vessels.

Galen was a prolific writer and was able to preserve his medical research in twenty-two volumes of printed text. He was a forceful, egoistic and dogmatic man.

For more than 14 centuries, Galen was quoted endlessly. It is surprising that no competitor threatened his reputation, nor were his scientific contributions put to test, expanded, revised or rejected. This was because
he lived at a time, when Christianity was rising in power. Though he himself was not a Christian, he believed that one God made everything in the universe for a particular purpose. It made his work popular with ultimate medical authority for Europeans.

Even when Vesalius proved the errors, the authorities in the field would say that the human body must have changed since Galen’s time, but Galen could not have been wrong!!