Medical Symbols: Part-1

Jayant Pai-Dhungat

Commonly used medical symbols take into account Greek mythological deities like Apollo (god of light, Sun, truth and medicine), his son Asclepius-God of healing, who was taught by Chiron-the wise Centaur. Asclepius’s first daughter was Hygeia goddess of hygiene & cleanliness (Preventive medicine). Panacea was second daughter of Asclepius and goddess of remedies (indirectly-medical research). The four main deities are used in Hippocratic Oath which has been taken by physicians for centuries. Recent Study carried out in Karnataka* (2014), to assess knowledge and awareness of true origins of medical symbols (the emblems and icons) among doctors and medical students, revealed that there was very little awareness (6%) about the main emblem of medicine i.e. rod of Asclepius and knowledge of other symbols was also lacking in medical fraternity. The present series is aimed at learning these and related interesting symbols through the medium of medical philately.

Rod of Asclepius

Asclepius, Greco-Roman God of medicine was son of Apollo (God of healing, truth and prophecy). Chiron the wise Centaur taught him the art of healing. He was renowned for his unsurpassed medical prowess. Asclepius’s rod is not like other rods used by aged, handicapped and blind. He used this thick staff to walk around the mountains to see patients. Emblem depicts a serpent entwined around a staff that is traditionally a knotty tree. This Greek icon has served as medical emblem since 2400 yrs. The rod of Asclepius, is a befitting representation of physician’s noble art of healing, and symbolizes authority. The combination with the snake adds further meaning. The snake is widely acknowledged as a symbol of good and evil. In its positive aspect, the snake shreds its skin, after having grown a new skin underneath, suggesting restoration, regeneration and revitalization. Moreover some snake venoms are fatally poisonous and at the same time have medicinal properties, becoming nature’s molecule of life and death. Therefore the serpent is also seen as dual nature of physician’s work that involves sickness and health, life and death. It even signifies the dual power of medicine whether it will harm or heal determined by dosage and situation.

Asclepius was honored as a hero and eventually worshiped as God. He is frequently represented standing, dressed in a long cloak. The cult began in Thessaly South Greece, but spread to many other parts of Greece and beyond. In 293 BC, it spread to Rome, where he was worshipped as Aesculapius. The rod of Asclepius has become an internationally recognized symbol of medicine. During the 10th Congress of the World Medical Association held in Havana, Cuba on April 6th 1956, WHO emblem was depicted for the first time on two stamps The Association advised the medical council of each country to adopt the rod of Asclepius. In 1902 Captain of the US Medical corps proposed the adoption of Caduceus as corps’s official symbol. This misunderstanding of ancient mythology and iconography led to inappropriate popularization of the caduceus as a medical symbol. Caduceus (double snaked rod) belonged to Hermes (Asclepius’s uncle) and Greek god of commerce. The erroneous assumption was pointed out several years later. Staff of Hermes lacks substantial background and hardly evokes the connotation produced by staff of Asclepius- an emblem of noble art of healing.