Medical Philately

Fig. 1: Ebers papyrus. Egypt, 1971
Fig. 2: Aretaeus of Cappadocia. Transkei, 1990
Fig. 3: Galen. Hungary, 1989
Fig. 4: Avicenna. Hungary, 1987
Fig. 5: Maimonides Moshe ben Maimon. Israel, 1953
Fig. 6: Herman Boerhaave. The Netherlands, 1938
Fig. 7: Louis Jacques Thénard. France, 1957

DIABETES: FROM ANCIENT EGYPT TO THE 18TH CENTURY

The Ebers papyrus (Fig. 1), dating about 1550 BC, is the first known description of the signs and symptoms of diabetes mellitus associated to a series of remedies to combat the typical polyuria. The term ‘diabetes’ was coined some centuries after by Aretaeus of Cappadocia (81-138) (Fig. 2), with the significance of ‘to pass through’ with reference to the peculiar polyuria of the diabetic patients, attributed by Galen (130-200 AC) (Fig. 3) to the kidney’s weakness.

The famous medieval physicians Ibn Sina or Avicenna (980-1037) (Fig. 4) and Maimonides Moshe ben Maimon (1135-1204) (Fig. 5) suggested other possible etiopathogenesis.

In the 18th century, Herman Boerhaave (1668-1738) (Fig. 6) and Louis Jacques Thénard (1777-1857) (Fig. 7) pointed out the correlation between hyperglycemia and polyuria.

Contributed by Federica Guaraldi*; Renato Pasquali*
*Endocrinology Unit, Department of Clinical Medicine, S. Orsola-Malpighi General Hospital, Bologna, Italy, 40138.