

The Ideal Physician, c. 320 BC

Hippocrates was born on the Greek island of Cos off the coast of Turkey about four hundred-sixty years before the birth of Christ. It is believed that his father was a physician, as were a number of his ancestors.

It is unclear whether he founded a school for physicians on his home island or joined an established institution. What is certain is that he did become associated with a medical school on Cos that charged a fee to its students to learn the secrets of healing. The reputation of the Hippocratic School at Cos soon spread beyond the island and attracted students from all corners of the Greek world.

The major distinction of the Hippocratic School was its emphasis on an empirical approach to the study of disease and an attempt to rationally deduce its cause. The patient's signs and symptoms were analyzed in order to determine a prognosis of recovery – an approach quite familiar to us today, but novel in ancient Greece where sickness was often viewed as divine retribution for behavior offensive to the Greek gods. The school produced a compendium of writings that helped spread its philosophy throughout ancient Greece and influenced succeeding generations to the point that Hippocrates is known as the "Father of Modern Medicine."

One modern legacy of the teachings of Hippocrates is the Hippocratic Oath sworn by medical students upon receiving the diploma that distinguishes them as physicians. Although the oath was most probably written after the death of Hippocrates, it represents his teachings and his view of the doctor-patient relationship. Two fundamentals of this relationship are that the physician should always respect his patient and do no harm in his attempt to resolve his patient's malady.

Hippocrates also prescribed how the physician should behave within his community in order to earn the respect of his fellow citizens and elevate his status. The following document describing the ideal behavior of a physician is again believed to have been written after the death of Hippocrates, but represents his teachings on the subject. Its dictates are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago.

"His character must be that of a gentleman, and, as such, honorable and kindly towards all."

"The position of a doctor must make him careful to keep his complexion and weight at their correct natural standard. For most people think that those who fail to take care of their own physical condition are not really fit to take care of that of others.

Secondly, he must have a clean appearance, and wear good clothes, using a sweet-smelling scent, which should be a totally unsuspecting perfume. This is pleasant when visiting the sick.

Also he must observe rules about his non-physical effect, not only in being quiet but also in being self-controlled in all aspects of life, for this has the best

result on his reputation.

His character must be that of a gentleman, and, as such, honorable and kindly towards all. For people dislike forwardness and interference, even if these qualities sometimes prove useful.

He must also pay attention to his technical ability, for people like the same medicine in small doses.

In facial expression he should be controlled but not grim. For grimness seems to indicate harshness and a hatred of mankind, while a man who bursts into guffaws and is too cheerful is considered vulgar. This must especially be avoided.

He must be just in every social intercourse, and a sense of fairness ought to help him in every dealing.

The relationship between doctor and patient is a close one. Patients submit themselves to doctors, who are always likely to be meeting women and girls, and entering houses with valuable possessions. Towards all these, therefore, he must keep himself under strict self-control.

The above, then, are the physical and psychological requirements for a doctor."

References:

Hippocrates's requirements for a physician appear in Workman, B.K. They Saw it Happen in Classical Times (1964); Bonnard, Andre, Greek Thought (1962); Brunschwig, Jacques, and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd (eds.) Greek Thought (2000).

How To Cite This Article:

"The Ideal Physician, 320 BC" EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2008).