



Medicine for Managers

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Metrodora

Female medical pioneers are under-represented in historical documentation, but one true pioneer was believed to be Metrodora. She is thought to have been a Greek physician of Egyptian origin. Her dates are unknown, but are believed to have been between AD 200 and AD 400. She is particularly remembered for her medical text “On the Diseases and Cures of Women”, found in a Byzantine manuscript in the Laurentian library in Florence.

The manuscript contains a range of writings on medical topics, but a key component is the first section which includes details of obstetrics and gynaecological disorders of the uterus. Indeed it outlines gynaecological methods which are still in use today.

Interestingly, the manuscript, which also includes writings from other physicians of the time, is the first known medical text to employ alphabetical headings. Metrodora also published several other medical treatises.

Details of Metrodora are unknown. It is also unclear whether she was the author, solely of the first section of the manuscript, whether she collected together all the elements which make up the whole manuscript or even whether her name (comprised of *Metro* meaning “womb” and *dora* meaning “gift”) was the actual title of the work and was incorrectly recorded as her name.

Metrodora is thought to have been born and brought up in Egypt. She was clearly a well-educated woman.

She would have struggled to establish her place as a physician because the Egyptians, though less

sexist than the Greeks and the Romans, still regarded women as complementary to men, although the ancient Egyptian laws regarded men and women as equal.

Under the law, they could divorce, had succession rights and could start their own businesses or work in some professions (such as healthcare). Some regard

Metrodora’s identity as the same as “Cleopatra the Physician”, who is regarded as the other ancient Egyptian female physician who has medical texts attributable to her.

Metrodora’s legacy, which has many elements that remain contemporary, places her works in



the list of the most trailblazing physicians. She wrote about:

- She is accredited with the use of a speculum to examine the vagina and cervix
- She identified pioneering surgical interventions for the treatment of malignant disease and ulceration in the uterus and ovaries
- She devised innovative surgical procedures for the hymen and for the aesthetic breast
- She introduced what is described today as the tampon, not only for menstrual control but also as a means of contraception and as a vehicle for the treatment of vaginal and other gynaecological infections.



- She identified new treatments for gynaecological disorders.
- She initiated discussion about sexual abuse and rape and provided criteria for determining whether a woman had been abused or raped.
- She wrote about the process of conception and childbirth
- She gave advice on general health and a variety of minor medical issues such as haemorrhoids
- She described some diseases of the breasts
- She initiated discussions about the use of aphrodisiacs, love-potions and improving female allure with cosmetics

There can be little doubt that this under-recognised woman pushed forward the boundaries of obstetrics and gynaecology hundreds of years, if not more than a millennium before others identified its significance and speciality.

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