



Medicine for Managers

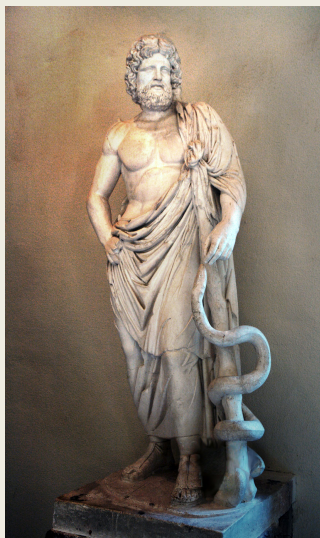
Dr Paul Lambden BSc MB BS BDS FDSRCS MRCS LRCP DRCOG FIHSCM

Aesculapius

Much of what is done in medicine these days had roots in Ancient Greece, albeit that so-called treatments at the time very frequently did more harm than good. Treatments were often irrational and downright dangerous and yet, within Greek writings and legends many patients did appear to be successfully treated. Socrates wrote positively about Aesculapius and Pluto suggested that he cured so many that 'Hades was becoming depopulated'

Aesculapius was the god of medicine in Greek religion and mythology. Medicine at the time was archaic compared to the skills acquired by the Hippocratic era a few centuries later.

However, Homer, who was probably contemporary with Aesculapius, wrote about him and described him as a mortal, although, by two centuries later, not only was he described as a God but he became an important one.



He came to represent the good and healing elements of medicine and the origin of medical

knowledge, preventive care and learning.

It is suggested that he was born, fathered by Apollo (or perhaps by Chiron, a centaur) of a mortal woman about 700BC and his name is first mentioned in Greek writing a few decades after this date.

By 500BC he was already a principal god of worship in parts of Greece and by 390BC a sanctuary to Aesculapius was built at Agrigento which is on the southern coast of Sicily.

The first temple dedicated to him was



constructed at Epidauros, in the eastern Peloponnese of Greece between 380 and 375BC.

Around 350BC the

Asclepeion, a dedicated healing temple, was built on Kos and is believed to be where Hippocrates obtained his medical training.

In 292BC the Romans adopted Aesculapius as a Roman God by stealing his sacred snake and setting up a temple on the banks of the Tiber.

The Rod of Aesculapius, with the snake entwined around it became the symbol of medicine and has endured and remains so today.

In mythology Zeus agreed to his deification and removed his mortal form with a thunderbolt. Once deified, people with illnesses and disabilities would come to worship at the shrines and temples that were built in his name

Sick people seeking help would come to Aesculapian temples on pilgrimages for purification and would lie on a couch within for the night.

It was believed that they were visited by the God or perhaps a trusted emissary, such as a snake and, if the God was satisfied with them, their illness would be cured.

Before the cult of Aesculapius, the Greeks had only a second rank deity of health; the goddess Hygeia. Her importance declined and she became accepted as Aesculapius' wife and later as his daughter.

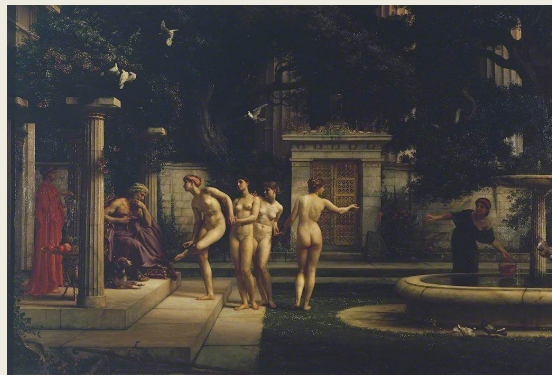
The Aesculapian cult grew rapidly as it filled a spiritual, economic and health need.

At its peak, the cult was probably the most successful attempt ever in history to fuse religion and magic with nature's cures (diet, rest, massage and hydrotherapy) into the service of healing.

Stories abound of his life, family, the miracles he performed and even restoring life to the dead. The snake is usually pictured with him because, to the Greeks, snakes were sacred beings of wisdom, healing and resurrection.

As with his life, there are many accounts of his death. There are suggestions that he cured so many people that the population grew uncontrollably, so he was killed by the Gods.

Other legends suggest that Hades claimed that Aesculapius was stealing his subjects and reported it to Zeus, who struck down Aesculapius with a thunderbolt.



A Visit to Aesculapius, Edward Poynter 1880

In summary, Aesculapius endows medicine with a God, together with staff and snake emblems used to this day.



His legends focus on preventive care, natural medication and hygiene, still watchwords for good medical care.

paullambden@compuserve.com