What do the Gods have to do with Ancient Greek and Roman Medicine?

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Mindy Schwartz, MD, will respond

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Abstract

In the beginning of Homer’s Iliad, the god Apollo inflicts a plague upon the Greek army, causing many corpses to rot in the plain. The reason: Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks, had taken the daughter of Apollo’s priest as his concubine. When Agamemnon releases the daughter, Apollo, just as suddenly, lifts the plague. In this period, the Greeks commonly believed that the gods could both inflict illness and take it away, just as they pleased. This changed with the advent of Hippocratic medicine. The Hippocratic doctors, following the legendary figure Hippocrates, asserted boldly that all diseases have a natural cause, and all can be cured by natural means, so long as they have not yet progressed to an advanced stage. Anyone who held the gods responsible for diseases was a charlatan, trying to mask his own incompetence by an appeal to divine causation. As proclaimed in the Hippocratic oath, the Hippocratic doctors made it a basic rule of healing not to inflict any harm.

Despite obvious failures, the Hippocratic doctors won a good reputation. Despite their reliance on human powers, they were not averse to having patients resort to divine help, especially in extreme cases. Nor did charlatanry vanish. It came back with special force
in the Roman period, when an enterprising trickster fashioned a snake with a human head, impersonating the god Asclepius. The snake promised cures for a fee.

Speakers

Prof. Asmis is Professor of Classics at the University of Chicago. She is the author of Epicurus' Scientific Method and numerous articles on Plato, Philodemus, Lucretius, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and others. Her current research focuses on Roman Stoicism, Epicurean psychology, Cicero’s political philosophy, and ancient aesthetics. Her teaching covers Greek and Roman philosophy, rhetoric, and medicine.

Dr. Schwartz is Professor of Medicine at the University of Chicago. She is a national leader in teaching the history of medicine. Her work in this area includes the development of a case-based History of Medicine curriculum for medical students and faculty, unique in its emphasis on incorporating medical history into clinical practice.