

# Editorial

## FROM ASCLEPIUS TO HIPPOCRATES: THE ART AND SCIENCE OF HEALING

By Richard H. Savel, MD, and Cindy L. Munro, RN, PhD, ANP



It is often valuable and instructive to look back in history to find out how we got where we are today. A colleague of ours recently named his blog “Asclepiad,”<sup>1</sup> referring to the ancient Greek god of medicine, Asclepius. As we looked further into background information on Asclepius—as well as information about the father of medicine, Hippocrates—we found some highly relevant points for readers we would like to share.

In literature,<sup>2,3</sup> the story of Asclepius is presented as myth and that of Hippocrates as fact—as that of a revered man who actually lived roughly 460-377 BCE. According to legend, Asclepius was the son of the Greek god Apollo and Coronis, who herself was the daughter of a Greek king. When Apollo learned from a raven that Coronis had been unfaithful, he struck her down, even though she was pregnant with Asclepius at the time. Feeling pangs of regret, Apollo saved Asclepius by removing him from the womb of Coronis as she burned on the funeral pyre, thus the origin of the name *Asclepius*, which means “to cut open.” Asclepius was then raised by the centaur Chiron, who educated him in the art of medicine.

### The Cult of Asclepius

Asclepius became so powerful in his ability to heal the sick that he also could raise the dead. Concerned that no more spirits would descend to the underworld, its leader Hades complained about Asclepius to his brother Zeus, who responded by killing Asclepius with a thunderbolt. Asclepius remained highly venerated by his followers, however, and many healing temples, known as *asclepeia*, were set up throughout ancient Greece.

In the ancient world, the focus of medicine was very much spiritual. People would travel from all over to spend time in one of these healing temples. An *asclepeion* included facilities for drinking water with special properties, water for bathing, gymnasium, space for rituals, and special rooms for dreaming. During these dreams, patients would become aware of what they needed to do to cure themselves of their ailments. They would report the dreams to priests, who then prescribed cures based on their interpretation of the dreams. The presence of dogs and nonvenomous snakes (*Aesculapian snakes*) was an essential part of the healing process; in fact, both dogs and snakes were present in many temples. *Aesculapian snakes* are the serpents seen in the “staff of Asclepius,” a universal sign for medicine.

© 2014 American Association of Critical-Care Nurses  
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4037/ajcc2014993>

# “ The tradition of a spiritual dimension in healing and curing ailments goes back thousands of years. ”

## Temples of Healing

How are these stories relevant to modern medicine and nursing? For one, they demonstrate, in a profound way, the spiritual origins of our healing arts. The ancient focus was highly ritualistic and reportedly effective. The buildings where healing took place were referred to as temples, and the followers of Asclepius were known as priests. Neither birth nor death were permitted to be a part of the experience of the Asclepian temples; those who were moribund were not allowed to participate.

As mentioned, followers of the hero-god Asclepius set up numerous healing temples throughout the Greek empire in antiquity. The focus was on diet, exercise, and a healthy lifestyle, with a profound emphasis on the spiritual. Because patients with life-threatening illnesses were unlikely to survive the journey to these temples, and because women did not give birth there, there was certainly a bias toward treating patients with mental and physical illnesses that tended to improve on their own. Nevertheless, an exploration of the history of Asclepius reveals that the tradition of a spiritual dimension in healing and curing ailments goes back thousands of years.

Focus on a healthy lifestyle; thinking healthy, pure thoughts; and an emphasis on improving diet and exercise have become mainstays of preventive medicine up to the present day. Clearly, then, focus on the spiritual and on alternative medicine is nothing new. All one need do is look back to our very earliest hero-gods in Greek mythology to find the origins of this crucial component of healing.

## Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine

As we move from the timeless Greek god of medicine to the father of medicine, we can attach actual dates: Hippocrates was born circa 460 BCE and died roughly 377 BCE. Although he was a follower of Asclepius, he saw the world quite differently. For Hippocrates, medicine and the healing arts ought to be seen not purely in a spiritual, religious, or magical sense, but with considerable and respectful attention to rationalism and science.

---

### About the Authors

**Richard H. Savel** is coeditor in chief of the *American Journal of Critical Care*. He is director, surgical critical care at Maimonides Medical Center and professor of clinical medicine and neurology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, both in New York City. **Cindy L. Munro** is coeditor in chief of the *American Journal of Critical Care*. She is associate dean for research and innovation at the University of South Florida, College of Nursing, Tampa, Florida.

Although the terms meant something different in his day, Hippocrates introduced concepts such as physiology, physical diagnosis, pathology, and surgery. And whereas they were severely limited by their lack of scientific knowledge, Hippocrates and his disciples originated a structured approach and a fundamental paradigm shift from the supernatural to the natural that would become the standard approach of Western medicine from that point forward. Hippocrates enabled medicine to become a field of its own rather than being seen as part of theology, and he taught topics such as disease categorization (eg, acute and chronic) and emphasized the all-important role of professionalism.

There is no question that Hippocrates revolutionized medicine, taking the field from the realm of religion and magic to an era of professionalism and integrity; in fact, he provided the basic structure for approaching diseases with a sound scientific mind. Although Hippocrates misunderstood some basic elements of human anatomy and physiology, he is credited with stating that human diseases are the result of dietary issues and other environmental factors, not a punishment from god. That in itself was revolutionary. After Hippocrates's death, many of his recommendations, such as taking case histories, died out until physicians such as Galen and others "rediscovered" Hippocrates centuries later.

## Providing Comprehensive Care

But let's not get too caught up in a history lesson. We simply want to remind readers that the history of medicine is long and complex. As critical care practitioners we are focused on science, and rightly so. Many questions fill our minds every day, such as the best way to optimize the interaction between patients and ventilators, how to improve organ perfusion, and how to fight sepsis. Ours is the technology of intubation, central lines, pressors, and antibiotics—tools that allow us to save people who would have died of "natural causes" in antiquity. Although these technologies enable us to save patients, do they also, in some small way, prevent us from providing comprehensive care? Therein lies a fundamental conundrum.

## Acknowledging Our Legacy

We neglect medicine's sacred origins at our peril. On the contrary, when we appropriately recall that the founding deities of our practice came from the worlds of religion, spirituality, magic, and worship, we in effect maintain the fundamental

“ From the very beginning of healing and medicine, technology—the *science*—was added to the spiritual, not the other way around. ”

humanity of what we do. We are not advocating going back to ancient times during which medicine was based on religion, superstition, and the interpretation of dreams—far from it. The lesson is that caring for patients is more than just the sum of our ability to manage technology.

We should keep that lesson in mind. Naturally, it's our first priority to focus on important clinical tasks such as preventing ventilator-associated pneumonia, catheter-associated urinary tract infections, and central line-associated bloodstream infections. But as we accept the challenges of safely securing a patient's airway, quickly starting antibiotics, and appropriately managing pressors, fluids, the ventilator, and various alarms, we must strenuously resist being overwhelmed by "information overload," remembering that our patients are, first and foremost, people. They are fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. From the very beginning of healing and medicine, technology—the *science*—was added to the spiritual, not the other way around. The origins of healing were essentially spiritual and holistic; that's what was available at the time.

Though our technology has given us the power to heal in ways that neither Asclepius nor Hippocrates would have imagined, we must do our best to preserve the good from Asclepius's time and offer our patients the comprehensive care they deserve. Just as Hippocrates began his career as a follower of Asclepius in one of his healing temples, we must remind ourselves that as modern healers we are

sons and daughters of Hippocrates and Asclepius: healing is both a science and an art. The history of medicine empowers us to obtain the broadest possible view of what it truly means to be a healer at the bedside. We owe it to our patients and ourselves to take a moment or two to reflect, reminding ourselves of the amazing heritage of our righteous profession.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

RS would like to thank Howard Doyle, MD, of the Montefiore Medical Center Critical Care Division for inspiring this editorial.

#### FINANCIAL DISCLOSURES

None reported.

#### eLetters

Now that you've read the article, create or contribute to an online discussion on this topic. Visit [www.ajconline.org](http://www.ajconline.org) and click "Responses" in the second column of either the full-text or PDF view of the article.

#### REFERENCES

1. Doyle HR. Asclepiad website. <http://asclepiad.net>. Accessed September 3, 1014.
2. Hart GD. *Asclepius: The God of Medicine*. London, England: Royal Society of Medicine Press; 2000.
3. Goldberg HS. *Hippocrates: Father of Medicine*. Bloomington, IN: Authors Choice Press; 2006.

---

To purchase electronic or print reprints, contact American Association of Critical-Care Nurses, 101 Columbia, Aliso Viejo, CA 92656. Phone, (800) 899-1712 or (949) 362-2050 (ext 532); fax, (949) 362-2049; e-mail, [reprints@aacn.org](mailto:reprints@aacn.org).