A Brief History of Elephantiasis

To the Editor—We read with great interest the description of the painting displaying "a woman with scales on her upper body and grossly enlarged lower limbs" on the cover of the 1 March 2012 issue of Clinical Infectious Diseases. As described by the cover art editors, the first reliable documentation of elephantiasis did not occur until an exploration of the Portuguese colony of Goa between 1588 and 1592. However, to the best of our knowledge, early records of this disease date back to much before the biblical time [1]. Indians were of the first to have known the disease Slipada (sli = elephant, pada = leg), as presented in the Sushruta Samhita [2]. The term was later used by the Roman medical encyclopedist Celsus (ca 30 BC–38 AD). Nonetheless, to the Greeks—including Hippocrates (ca 460–370 BC), Galen (129–200 AD), and Paulus Aegineta (625–690 AD)—the term elephantiasis was associated with ambiguity, implying both filariasis and leprosy [3]. It was not until 807–870 AD that Ali ibn Sahl Rabban al-Tabbari first described elephantiasis as Daa al-Fil (daa = disease, fil = elephant) and denoted treatments in Firdows al-Hikmat (Paradise of Wisdom), the first existent medical book in medieval Persia [4]. Other medieval Persian physicians such as Rhazes (ca 865–925), Akhawayni (?–983), Haly Abbas (930–994), Avicenna (981–1037), and Jorjani (1042–1137) followed al-Tabbari’s concept of elephantiasis in their medical books [5–8]. Altogether, the first authentic records of elephantiasis and its related signs, symptoms, and treatment could be attributed to ancient India, Greece, and particular-ly medieval Persia much earlier than the exploration of Goa in the late 16th century.

Note

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