

The Physicians of Pharaonic Egypt

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Egyptology is a field of study in which research and scholarship have been invested and practised on a grand scale. The influence of the Pharaonic civilization of Egypt on other civilizations, ancient and medieval, has been far reaching. Herodotus, the Greek historian, studied this civilization and wrote on this. It was from this civilization that the Greeks learnt a lot about religion, philosophy, art and using their adoptive and interpretative genius, laid the foundation of the glories of Greece. Even our own history of religion, as recorded in The Quran, mentions Egypt and the prophethood of Moses in relation to this civilization. No wonder, then that from the ancient to the present day scholars and lay-persons have been attracted to ancient Egypt and have sought from it information to understand and appreciate the grand continuity of human civilization.

Scholars have not only devoted attention to the arts and scripture of Egypt, they have also applied themselves to the study of the social and technological developments which made this civilization possible. Therefore, it was inevitable that Egyptian medicine would also attract scholars as a specialized branch of Egyptology. Profound contribution was made to this field by a Belgian surgeon and historian, Frans Jonckheere (1903-1956), who wrote a series of papers which are published in book form in 1958 after his death. In these papers he studied the institution of ancient Egyptian medicine, identified and named physicians practising medicine. His source was 1200 papyri on ancient Egyptian medicine which have been preserved to this day. Supplemental, and sometimes very basic, information are also gleaned from paintings and other artefacts from Egyptian tombs and architectural edifices. Now we have an Egyptian specialist of this field, Paul Ghalioungvi, M.D., F.R.C.P., who has published a book, "The Physicians of Pharaonic Egypt". What he has done, to quote from his own words, is to "update Jonckheere's work and to attempt, within the limits of the available data, to provide a clearer view of the identity of the healers, of what they represented, of their corporate structure, their social standing, and something of their social life". The period covered in the study starts from 2900 B.C. and comes to an end in 1223 B.C.

It is acknowledged that a genuine medical profession is first encountered in the ancient Egypt. In the Pharaonic civilization patients entrusted themselves to various categories of healers. Reading Dr. Ghalioungvi's book, it appears that the institution of healing as much organized in ancient Egypt as it is today. Practising medicine and attending to patients were lay physicians as well as dentists, surgeons and ophthalmologists, male and female gynaecologists as well as bone-setters. There are physicians to attend to workers as we have factory doctors today. Specialization in medicine was common and there are physicians attending to diseases and malfunctions affecting different parts of the human limbs and organs. In addition, the art of healing was not confined to medicine alone, but religion and magic also contributed to it. In ancient Egypt science had not been severed from religion and magic, and it is conceivable that eminent physicians are elevated to the ranks of priests and magicians and are then identified as physician priests and Physician magicians.

In addition to physicians, there were others belonging to the medical profession who performed duties such as bandaging and embalming of dead bodies. Physicians were also designated as scribes and writers. The Egyptian god of medicine Imhotep was depicted as a scribe. He was a great physician and scribe. He was a great physician and civil servant who was deified by the ancient Egyptians. The significance of the physician's ability as a writer would suggest that many of them may have devoted themselves to recording their knowledge for others and when a high official of the fifth dynasty of the pharaonic kingdom was struck with a sudden illness books were brought to be consulted for his

treatment. It is interesting to note that physicians engaged a higher status and prestige than surgeons, as was the case all over the world until the post World War II days. Besides men, animals were also treated with care and veterinary science was practised by professionals. However, the medical profession was also exclusive then as now, because the veterinarians were not called doctors. The medical auxiliary staff of the ancient Egypt consisted of manicurists, bathers, hair dressers and such other technicians who attended upon the Pharaohs and whom we would call beauticians today.

In ancient Egypt, the medical profession like others was organised in a hierarchy of its own. A picture of this hierarchy emerges from a list given in Dr. Ghalioungvis book. The list mentions physicians, Chief of physicians, Inspector of physicians, Overseers of physicians, Master of physicians, Chief of physicians of the North, Chief of physicians of the North and South, Chief of physicians of the South and North. It is evident that medical practitioners hold prestigious state appointments and may have fought and jockeyed for power and titles. Sometimes the Chief of physicians in North hold responsibility for the South as well at another time this was upset by the incumbent in the south.

Physicians were attached to the royal household in a hierarchical order with suitable 'titles and responsibilities for attending upon the king and his queen. Bureaucracy in the medical profession also existed in ancient Egypt and physicians were as prone to fight for position and power as they are now. The social standing and background of the ancient pharaonic physicians can be determined, in addition to their state titles and responsibilities, from such evidences as personal tombs, family tombs, statues, mention of their names in written documents and sarcophages or coffins made for them. Obviously, those who could afford a personal tomb occupied the highest level of social merit in the profession and society. Sometimes lay physicians reached this height and there is evidence of two personal tombs in the name of lay physicians. Several physicians belonged to noble and wealthy families, as the medical profession was held in very high esteem. Even some Egyptian kings were not above calling themselves physicians and are known to have practised medicine.

This brief review of the medical profession in the pharaonic civilization should appropriately conclude with the remuneration of physicians. It appears that a loaf of bread and a jug of beer contributed the unit of payment. Oil, milk, vegetables, fish, meat, clothing and poultry are also exchanged for services rendered in the later part of this civilization. There is evidence that gold and other precious metals are given as gifts by the wealthy patients.

Physicians were state-servants. They were paid by state and charged no fees. A medical tax called "iatrision" was levied for this purpose. However, there is no definite information available to support that private practice was not allowed. This would suggest that only those physicians who are employed by the state are paid from the medical tax. Dr. Ghalioungvi says that, "many physicians were salaried by the state or by private persons, but that private medicine flourished at the same time. Whether salaried physicians could charge fees from individual patients cannot be said, but some of them received magnificent gifts and attained great wealth".

Ancient Egyptian physicians practised not only in their own country, but are known to have travelled abroad. Egyptian medicine was held in very high esteem. Pharaohs used to send eminent physicians to the neighbouring kingdoms. Even in later ages when the ancient pharaonic civilisation was breaking up, Egyptian physicians were attached to the Persian kingdom. Herodotus reports that the great Persian king "Darius was accustomed to have attached to his person the most reputed Egyptian physicians - However, they already had competition from Greek physicians. This is proved by the story of an Egyptian physician who while attending to the sprained foot of Darius twisted it clumsily and caused him acute pain and loss of sleep for seven days. A Greek captive physician was called to attend to the king and he was successful in curing him. Thereupon, the king wished to punish the Egyptian physician cruelly and condemned him to be impaled to death. The Greek physician saved his life proving that the medical may have been closer then what it is today.