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Hippocratic Writings

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Hippocrates , J. Chadwick (Translator) , G.E.R. Lloyd (Introduction)

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It is impossible to be certain which, if any, of the works in the Hippocratic corpus were written by Hippocrates himself (c.430 BC). His fame was such that many Greek medical writings became attributed to him. What they have in common is not dogma but, rather, constructive debate between one another. They also share a concern with meticulous observation and an insistence on physical, not supernatural, causation of illness. The writers were the pioneers of rational medicine; their ideas, dominant for centuries, still reveal to us the ideal of ethical practice, as well as the origins not just of Western medicine but of scientific method. This excellent selection of Hippocratic treatises shows the range of writing and thought. Some are technical works on embryology, surgery or anatomy; others are addressed to a lay audience; all are informed with the spirit of inquiry. G.E.R. Lloyd's authoritative introduction puts them into their contemporary context and assesses their later influence.

Hippocratic Writings Details

Date : Published November 24th 1983 by Penguin Classics (first published March 6th 1978)

ISBN : 9780140444513

Author : Hippocrates , J. Chadwick (Translator) , G.E.R. Lloyd (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 384 pages

Genre : Classics, Philosophy, Science, Nonfiction, History, Health, Medicine

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From Reader Review Hippocratic Writings for online ebook

Jesse says

This is a fairly interesting collection of medical treatises, procedures, essays, logs, and, what is most famous of all now, the Hippocratic oath. For two millenia, the writings collected here were the best the West had to offer in terms of medical knowledge. Among the highlights are an excellently written procedural manual on fractures, a speculative essay on how climate affects health (peoples in humid lands are deemed mentally sluggish), and the morbidly funny logs that track the health of patients who were receiving treatment based on almost complete ignorance. The logs read like this: Day 1 - quartan fever sets in / Day 3 - muscles sore, eyes yellow / Day 8 - symptoms worsen, blood drainage from all orifices / Day 14 - patient recovering, symptoms have abated / Day 15 - death.

Jairo Fraga says

Many insights on the beginning of medicine. Hippocratic "doctors" used to think that the environment (air, water, etc), season of the year and unbalance of "humours" caused or contributed to diseases.

Some interesting things were already pointed at that time, like "diet" and even the possibility of the patient lie about what he is eating. Hippocrates and other writers charged money or at least a possible increase for reputation by taking care of the sick, and the Oath, with its subsequent evolution, is of interest of anyone on the medical area (I enjoyed it even not being one of them).

Not very great writings but, still, useful information to know.

Roy Lotz says

Life is short, and Art long; the crisis fleeting; experience perilous, and decision difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and externals cooperate.

It's healthy, I think, to take a moment once in a while and reflect how different our lives would be without modern medicine. Allow me to start.

At this very moment, two pieces of glass sit suspended on frames before my eyes, bringing the world into focus. When I was very young, I had trouble with my feet, and so had to wear special corrective shoes; and when I grew older, I developed problems in my knees, requiring physical therapy. All my life, I haven't had to worry about severe diseases, because I've been inoculated; the worst sickness I've ever had was the flu. All of my adult teeth now sit snugly in my mouth, despite some drilling and filling, thanks to my diligent dentist. Yes, life would be far less pleasant without the timely intervention of modern medicine. I would see poorly, be bow-legged and flat-footed, and half of my teeth would be rotting out of my mouth. Who knows? Maybe I wouldn't even have survived past infancy?

During my reading of this book, this thought kept popping into my mind: “Thank God I didn’t live back then!” Yes, it would’ve been nice to hobnob with Sophocles and Plato, to see the wonderful works of architecture and art; but life is hard to appreciate without one’s health. I love and cherish Hippocrates for originating a practice that has saved so many lives; but I’d rather see my doctor than one of Hippocrates’s pupils.

Well, on to the book. The *Hippocratic Writings* is a disjointed and various body of texts, probably written by many different people. It treats of surgery, hemorrhoids, ulcers, fractures, epidemics, and much else. Many parts of the book are fascinating windows into the ancient world; but many parts are little more than tedious instruction manuals. Unless you are a historian or a curious doctor, I think the best way to read this would be to skim until you found something that caught your eye. I tried to read it straight through, but some parts were so dry and technical as to be nearly incomprehensible. (By the way, I read the edition in the old *Great Books of the Western World* series; the Penguin edition might be better edited.)

The modern reader will notice much that is distressingly wrong. For one, the Hippocratics believed in the four humors of the body—black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood—which we now know to be hopelessly false. There is also much concern with the weather, the stars, and various other things that seem totally irrelevant. For example, there is one passage about how, if a fever lasts an even number of days, it won’t come back; but if it lasts an odd number of days, it’s sure to return.

Nevertheless, I think that the reflections contained in this book are, in the main, impressively modern. For one, the Hippocratics were scrupulously empirical; they amassed tons of observations, and emphasized experience. There are even a few passages which seems to suggest that they were doing dissections: “If you will cut open the head, you will find the brain humid, full of sweat, and having a bad smell. And in this way truly you may see that it is not a god that injures the body, but disease.”

Sometimes, the writing style will seem strangely contemporary—even journalistic. I particularly liked the case studies. I want to quote one of these case studies at length, because they’re fun to read:

Case I. Philiscus, who lived by the Wall, took to bed on the first day of acute fever; he sweated; towards night was uneasy. On the second day all the symptoms were exacerbated; late in the evening had a proper stool from a small clyster [enema]; the night quiet. ... On the fifth, about mid-day, had a slight trickling of pure blood from the nose; urine varied in character, having floating in it round bodies, resembling semen, and scattered, but which did not fall to the bottom; a suppository having been applied, some scanty flatulent matters were passed; night uncomfortable, little sleep, talking incoherently; extremities altogether cold, and could not be warmed; urine black; slept a little towards day; loss of speech, cold sweats; extremities livid; about the middle of the sixth day he died.

(Interestingly enough, there is a lot of careful examination of urine and feces. Also, most of these case studies end in death—not very reassuring.)

Another impressive quality of the Hippocratics were their professionalism. This is most famously exemplified by their oath; and, every now and then, there is a little pieces of advice for physicians wishing to improve their bedside manner (such as talking to distract a patient while performing a painful procedure). The text itself is a wonderful example of the seriousness with which they approached medicine; it is perhaps one of the first and most influential examples of the textbook.

Perhaps the most impressive section is “On the Sacred Disease.” There, the writer rejects all divine

explanations of diseases, and shows that the people who attempt to cure these diseases with 'purifications' are quacks: "Those who first referred this malady to the gods appear to me to have been just such persons as the conjurors, purifiers, mountebanks, and charlatans now are, who give themselves out for being excessively religious, and as knowing more than other people." Then the author goes on to show that, if inspected, these supposedly 'divine' diseases leave characteristic marks on the patients' bodies, which points to a natural cause. It's wonderfully modern in feel, even if the 'natural' explanations proposed are all incorrect.

Those Ancient Greeks really were impressive. I'd be interested if any historians attempted to explain why, of all places and times, such a free and curious society originated. Well, whatever the case, at least we can be grateful for them—and also, in this case, grateful we aren't them.

Lancer says

there is something oddly gratifying reading through records of people dying from a myriad of terrifying gross bloody diarrhea deaths and knowing that chances of said fate have dropped dramatically over the centuries. It is so morbidly detached from emotion at times. one of the most tolerable university reads i have had.

Russell says

The text was fairly interesting, although outdated, it was the story behind the text that I really enjoyed. The progress of Greek thought from random folk cures to the slow creation of the basics of the scientific method and a real profession.

Not a must read, but a good choice if you are brushing up on the Ancient Greek world and the impact it had on Western Civilization.

James says

A fine start on the Hippocratic corpus -- think of this as a "greatest hits" volume; it doesn't at all cover the entire corpus, but it gives you the big picture of just how diverse this collection of writings is. The introduction is also aimed at a popular, educated audience and therefore serves an important function of helping to make sense of the materials (rather than assuming that the reader is already an expert in secondary scholarship concerning Hippocrates).

Corinne says

I read this book to understand the basis of our modern allopathic medicine (because Hippocrates is considered as the father of modern medicine), when the allopathic doctors were having troubles to treat my allergies.

It seemed to me that the only wisdom that the modern medicine has kept from this learned man is his

sermon, which is used even today to swear in the doctors for their profession.

In any case, I really loved the chapters 'Regimens in acute diseases', 'The sacred Disease', 'Dreams', 'The Nature of Man', and particularly 'A Regimen for Health'.

The practice of medicine today would be so different if the medical profession had adhered to the wisdom of Hippocrates, and not yielded to the pressure of finance.

George says

Primum non nocere. Ars longa, vita brevis. You will know these alleged sayings of Hippocrates of Cos. Often called the Father of Modern Medicine, the ideas and works of Hippocrates held sway and were still taught until fairly recently, given their age. The Hippocratic Writings is a collection of chapters and essays from The Corpus, the Hippocratic School's body of work. You will have of course heard of the oath, maybe you knew less of the content. Amongst other things it forbids abortions and establishes Urology as the first spate medical discipline ('do not cut for the Stone').

We may scoff at the old-fashioned ideas, but we have the privilege of standing on giants' shoulders. With a modern perspective, we can still be surprised at what they knew and what they didn't. For example, it was believed that: the mind being located in the heart; homosexuality results from too much horse-riding; that diseases are the result of natural processes (not the interventions of gods); that these processes are influenced by behaviour and environment and follow a set course. There is a mix of what we now take to be true and what we believe to be false.

Personally I laughed at the ideas that fevers swell over days, but as I learnt this applies to malaria and a number of tropical diseases on my Infectious Diseases placement. How confident would you be in treating pneumonia without antibiotics or blood tests or fractures without x-rays? With this in mind it is amazing to see how much they could do with what little they had. With economic restrictions laying an increasingly heavy hand on the services we provide, it is very apparent that things are coming full circle. The simplistic treatments of preventative medicine, exercise, diet and environment are held to be the future of medical care. They were also its past.

Was Hippocrates the father of medicine? Was there a single man? It is probably better to refer to the Hippocratic School; some of the Corpus is contradictory and plenty of scholars agree that it is the work of more than one person. The importance lies in that this was the product of a school, that the ideas of medicine needed to be passed on a developed. Thus we can see these essays as sections of a textbook and it shouldn't be surprising when the writers elaborate on the influences of environment on public health or the dimensions of a bench used to correct dislocations.

I can appreciate my position of being a 21st Century boy, that I do not have to suffer leeching or castration for whatever ails me. Instead I have the luck of receiving quality care. Nonetheless, it is fascinating to see where these ideas come from. This work not only recorded the birth of methods of medicine but also the philosophy of medicine. If you really want some perspective of your position as a doctor, to be able to look over your shoulder and see the long line of practitioners extending behind you, read this book.

Zachary G. Augustine says

The Hippocratics, famous for their Oath, were actually a very diverse and widespread group of traveling doctors that shared few common opinions. The unusually conservative Oath, in which doctors declare "not to cut, even for the stone", is probably a specific cult and not reflective of the greater part of the doctors of 6th century Greece. Indeed, the latter parts of the Hippocratic Writings include many contradictions to the oath which can be confusing without the proper historical context.

Within its context, this book is reduced to a sort of museum piece that reflects many long-held scientific and medical theories. Inheritance of acquired characteristics, the health effects of water and wind, and a kind of Aristotelian belief in the elements are all prevalent. Within these mistaken beliefs the Hippocratics do make some scientific deductions, but they are of little interest to most modern readers, only to a historian of science. It is mainly interesting to see how certain prejudices in scientific thought (e.g. blood as impure) have persisted for so long in cultural thought.

That being said, this Penguin edition is quality. It contains almost the entire corpus--anything worth reading at least, I think its missing a few of the non-medical works--with good annotations and endnotes.

Unfortunately, this book remains one of those primary texts that doesn't offer much to those who try and read it in a casual manner. However, the introduction (more of a historical essay, really) by G.E.R. Lloyd is excellent and I would highly recommend his book *Early Greek Science: From Thales to Aristotle*. If you have an interest in ancient Greek science, then *The Hippocratic Writings* are probably something you can pass by in favor of the large amount of other quality works on the subject.

Vera Marsova says

Life is short, art is long, opportunity fleeting, experiment dangerous, judgement difficult. Not only must the physician show himself prepared to do what is necessary; he must also secure the co-operation of the patient, the attendants, and of external circumstances.

- Hippocrates, Aphorisms I.1

Brittany Jackson says

I find it fascinating to think about how the Greeks looked at disease and the course modern medicine has followed.
