

# THE MEDICAL COLUMN

by Yale Kanter

## MEDICINE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Egypt was the medical centre of the ancient world. Herodotus, in describing the history of Egypt, pictures it as the home of the specialist, "Medicine is practiced among them on a plan of separation, each physician treats a single disorder, and no more; thus the country swarms with medical practitioners, some undertaking to cure disease of the eye, others of the head, others of the teeth, others of the intestines, and some those which are not local."

One therefore must pity the poor patient with swollen legs, distended abdomen, faulty vision, and headaches of an advanced heart disease. He must have been dosed and prayed over in every doctor's office and temple throughout the land of the pyramids. Nevertheless, Diodorus Siculus explained, "the whole manner of life in Egypt was so evenly ordered that it would appear as though it had been arranged according to the rules of health by a learned physician, rather than by a law-giver."

The effort of medicine to extricate itself from magic runs through the entire story from its dawn down to the present day. In Egypt, we find that this separation was impossible, for all the physicians were priests, and the gods were ever present.

The Egyptians were never consistent and their belief in divine healing did in no way hinder their search for earthly remedies. Their explanation was that every medicine would be more effective if taken with incantation. "Welcome, remedy, welcome, which destroyed the trouble in this my heart and in these my limbs. The magic of Iturus (a hawk-headed deity) is victorious the remedy, "is an incantation from one of the best known papyrus."

The drugs of the Egyptians were mainly of animal origin, and sound like a witch's materia medica. Those prescribed were the flesh of lizards, blood of bats, the womb of a cat, the lung of a crocodile, semen and testicles of asses, the vulva of a dog, and milk of a living-in woman. These medicines became so popular that in time the race of man was to prepare 79 remedies from the hyena. Mercury claimed by many as the God of Medicine, is depicted by the Egyptians as being bald, and not liking baldness, the Egyptians treated the condition seriously. One prescription consisted of writing ink and cerebro pinal fluid, another was composed of toes of a dog, ripe dates, and asses' hoof; and for partial baldness, the fat of a lion, hippopotamus, crocodile, goose, snake and Nubian ibex.

By their extensive use of animal remedies, the Egyptians became the governors of organotherapy. Much more testicular, ovarian, hepatic, adrenal, and thyroid extract are consumed in the world today than when the Pharaohs were in power.

No account of the medicine of ancient Egypt would be complete without some reference to the strange custom of preserving the human body after death — the lost art of mummification. Embalming was practiced in Egypt from 4000 BC to 600 AD. Herodotus, in a graphic description, describes the process. "They take first a crooked piece of metal and with it they draw out the brain through the nostrils, thus getting rid of a portion,

while the skull is cleared of the rest by rinsing with drugs; next they make a cut along the flank with a sharp stone, and take out the whole contents of the abdomen. (The putrescible viscera were cleansed and later returned to the body.) After this they fill the cavity with myrrh, cassia, and other spices, and the body is placed in matron for 70 days. Then it was washed and wrapped from head to foot in fine linen bandages smeared with gum . . . it is given back to the relations who close it in a wooden case, shaped in the figure of a man. The case is fastened and placed upright in the sepulchral chamber. Such is the most costly way of embalming the dead." There was another technique, which was much cheaper, and consisted essentially of "injecting quantities of cedar oil through the rectum; the aperture was then closed to hinder the injection from flowing backwards; the body lay in brine for 70 days; and when the cedar oil was thrown out, such was its strength that the dissolved organs came with it." These long silent mummies, after sleeping for thousands of years, now tell their story, and pathologists are having a field day. This one had multiple abscesses in his kidney, and the bacilli can still be stained; this one had gallstones and another urinary calculi; this one suffered from constipation as his intestines are obstructed; and the lumen of his subclavian artery is nearly blocked by a clot—he had a narrow escape.

It is rather surprising that in spite of the post-mortem examination, which was part of the process of embalming, the Egyptians showed no great interest in Anatomy or Physiology, nor were they concerned to ascertain the cause of death. They lacked the spirit of inquiry and the thirst for knowledge which characterized the Greeks.

A few medical papyri have been passed through the ages, by being lost and thus escaping the vandalism of man. Some of these are:

The Veterinary and Gynaecological Papyri from Kahun—are the oldest yet discovered (2160-1788 BC).

The Papyrus of Mother and Child — although not devoid of medical interest — is predominantly magical.

The Surgical Papyrus—(about 1600 BC), describes ten cases of wounds of the head, seven of the nose, ten of ear, lip and jaw, six of the neck and throat, five of the collar bone and shoulders, nine of the chest and breast, and one incomplete case of spinal ailment. Each case begins with the name of the ailment, followed by an examination giving the symptoms, diagnoses, verdict and treatment. It was meant to be a Book on Surgery and External Medicine, beginning with injuries of the head and concluding with the feet. However, it ends abruptly "at the 17th column in the middle of a line and the sentence which was left incomplete 3500 years ago, will never be finished." One of its most significant passages is the one comparing pulsations to the inundations of the Nile, which come and go. The developed, "there is in the heart conception of the pulse is thus a vessel leading to every member of the body. As the physician places his finger on the head, neck, arms, hands, feet or body, everywhere he will find the

## Classics Society To Be Formed At Dalhousie

A new society is about to be formed on the campus—the Classics Society. Under the guidance of some professors in the classical language department this club promises to fill a great need on the campus as well as to offer the interested student some pleasant and interesting evenings throughout the college year.

From the very start, before even explaining the aims of the society, the organizers would urge the students not to be frightened away by the scholarly sounding title. This is not an organization directed towards the brains on the campus but on the contrary to those who, like most of us, know very little about the classical world. The aim, then, is to try to reconstruct the spirit and atmosphere of these long past eras, and to acquaint the members with Roman - Greco times in a very enjoyable manner by informal gatherings and by fostering discussion groups and showing movies and an occasional talk by some qualified speaker.

The club has in mind, as its main project the performance of a Greek play in translation.

Certainly there was never a greater need for such a club. Every year our universities seem to be drifting farther away from the classical tradition, cutting themselves off from a very fascinating age. So anything Dalhousie students can do to kindle an interest in the Roman-Greco civilizations will be well worth while. Who knows? You may be encouraging a new Renaissance in the Atomic Age.

Everybody is welcome to the general meeting which is set for October 23rd at 8 p.m. at King's College in the Haliburton Room. If enough people are interested there will be a few social gatherings throughout the year. Someone suggested re-enacting a Roman orgy—sounds pretty good. Better send your best toga to the cleaners!

### The Classics Society

will hold its first general meeting in

at 8 p.m. on

### The Haliburton Room

Tuesday

October 23rd

heart, for the heart leads to every member, and speaks in the vessels of every member."

The Therapeutic Papyrus of Thebes (written 1552 BC), contains the inevitable incantations as well as the diseases treated, mainly of the viscera and organs of special sense. Seven hundred remedies are mentioned, some of the drugs serve mankind today, as opium, castor oil, olive oil, copper salts and various other metallic salts.

## The Interview

by Jim Goring

He had come. This old man, to make his home in Halifax. I had gone to visit him.

In his study I met him, delighted to see me and eager to tell me of his experiences. His study, a cozy room, was decorated in a modern fashion with mahogany wall paneling, gray carpeting on the floor and indirect lighting from a pale ceiling. In this atmosphere I listened. I listened as I had never before. He told me of the men he had known. The men he had heard of. Plying the last of the schooners off the banks of Newfoundland they were; and of they that hunted and explored in Africa and India.

He told me of the women; of England and his childhood there, (for he had been born in Bombay, India); and of the United Service College he had attended. All this was to stand in good stead in the service of his country; for not only was he a soldier, but also a great scholar and a nobel prize-winning poet. Both his grandfathers had been ministers, but he hadn't let that bother him. He had enjoyed life anyway.

He told me of his buddies, in the rough and tumble life of the army, of life in the barracks and in the field, of the hand to hand fighting, the wounded, the parades back home . . . and he spoke of the navy, very old and very wise; of combat, above and below the waves.

"Submarines are like cats (he said). They never tell who they were out with last night, and they sleep as much as they can. Like the destroyer, the submarine has created its own type of officer and men — with language and traditions apart from the rest of the Service. The commander's is more a one-man job, and the crew's more teamwork, than any other employment afloat. They play hourly for each other's lives with Death the Umpire always at their elbow on tiptoe to give them OUT.

Hence the remark of the highly trained sailor-man in these latitudes (North Sea in the depths of winter) who, on being told by his superior officer in the execution of his duty to go to Hell, did insubordinately and enviously reply, "D'you think I'd be here if I could?" Whereupon he caused the entire personnel, beginning with the commander, to say "Amen", or words to that effect." . . .

I closed the book. It was put back. I got up, opened the thick teak door and went out. The nippy autumn air and the setting sun behind King's and the Shack brought me about, quickly. He had come. He had come at last, to rest in Halifax. And I thought,

Home is the sailor, home from the sea,  
And the hunter, home from the hill.

\*The quotation is directly from Rudyard Kipling's works.

Other Papyrus reveal that the ears were believed to be the organ of respiration, as well as of hearing, and the statement is made that, "the breath of life enters by the right ear and the breath of death by the left ear." This rather confused series of observations shows that at least some attempt was made to understand the mechanism of the human body, although the medicine of the period appears to have been mainly blind empiricism.

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