

Medical Women in Antiquity

In Ancient Egypt males dominated the medical field but women, highly socially respected, could also exercise that profession. They enjoyed equality under social and civil law and greater freedom of choice, could own land, businesses, become priestesses and scribes. They got training and resources available in the larger temples and scribal schools, being one for female doctors located at Neith's Temple in Sais (Lower Egypt Nile Delta). This earliest ancient goddess worshipped in Egypt protected physicians and parturient women during later epochs. Feminine symbols linked soon with the healing powers were 'the knot of Isis' resembling an ankh. Associated with this temple-school, Pesehet (ca. 2500 BC), a pioneering female doctor known by name in Old Kingdom, was 'Lady Overseer of Female Physicians', but it is unclear whether she was a practicing physician or a teacher.

Herodotus and Diodorus refer that father's functions passed to his children to succeed him, indicating intra-familial transmission of knowledge. A physician's handbook might imply that his daughters were included within his professional life, but not as official apprentices or attendants. The role of female medical practitioners, however, had probably more to do with female networks in a society of relatively strict gender separation. Nurses might have been the women attendants helping during birth itself, being the history of obstetrics inextricably linked with midwifery and with collaboration of highly specialized professionals, who ensured women's health during pregnancy and after, even though the customary term for them is unknown.

On the other hand, for the Hippocratic Corpus' writers, men, more rational than women, without rational research to practice medicine, dominated the profession of physicians. Greek women, regarded as highly sexual beings not having political rights, in charge of raising the children and producing the families clothes, were controlled by men in all stages of their lives. Celibacy was bad for a woman's health and problems with the wandering womb were thought to affect the woman's organism, causing symptoms of irrationality (hysteria), only restored by sexual intercourse and pregnancy.

During the more tolerant Hellenistic era, the continuous tradition of freedom, education and equality of Egyptian women influenced the women's position in Greek society, allowed to be educated and praised in public for their intellectual feats. Research and training would take place in the Alexandria medical school, at the Museion, and Herophilus disapproved the Hippocratic wandering womb

that was fixed. Women doctors offered specializations beyond gynecology and obstetrics and iatromea or midwives, being Artemis considered the first, received some further medical training.

The famous doctors' children, male or female, would also follow the medical profession, continuing the family tradition. Among them stand out Agnodice, the first female physician to practice legally in 4th century BC in Athens, Pantheia and Auguste, both physician's wives, Aurelia Alexandria Zosime, Metilia, Anthiochis of Tlos, cited by Galen, Aspasia, quoted by Aetius on gynecology, Metrodora who wrote Concerning the Feminine Diseases of the Womb.

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