

Hippocrates' case reports from the greater Larissa area

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Introduction

Hippocrates was born on the island of Kos in 460 BC. According to his main biographer (1) Soranos Ephesios (ca 100 AD), he spent the last years of his life in Larissa (Fig. 1), a city placed in the south of Olympus in the middle of a plain area in the region Thessalia (Fig. 2). He died in Larissa at an older age, presumably in 377 BC, and he was claimed to have become 85, 90, 104 or 109 years of age.

Hippocrates is the father of modern medicine. In the numerous books (about 70) assigned to his name, which are grouped in the Corpus Hippocraticus, detailed observations of patients and diseases as well as their treatment are included in a very scientific manner (2). He is taking clear distance from any superstition or theocratic explanations of disease.

During the years of his stay in Larissa Hippocrates and his pupils practiced medicine and a significant part of this work is described in the Corpus Hippocraticus (2).



Fig. 1. Monument of Hippocrates in Larissa. The Hippocrates' statue is a sculpture created by Georgios Kalakallas, a sculptor born in Tyrnavos, Larissa, Greece in 1938, Professor emeritus of the School of Arts at the University of Athens.

Aim of the project

The Riga ISHM Congress is the first one to include the International Association for the History of Nephrology (IAHN) as a joint partner. The initiative to present Hippocrates' cases from Larissa was undertaken because Larissa was the place where the formal contact of collaboration between the two Bodies was signed.

Furthermore, very little has been discussed up today in regard to the life and the medical services of Hippocrates during his stay in Larissa in old age (1). In the present study our aim was principally to present the Hippocrates' cases treated in Larissa and potentially to draw some information about the nosology, the health system, the way of life and the social environment of ancient Thessalia in the 5th century BC.

Materials and methods

We systematically reviewed the Epidemiae books ("Epidemion I to VII", 3, 4) of the Corpus Hippocraticus (2), in order to find and analyze all cases treated by Hippocrates and his students in places of the Thessalia region. The reason for choosing the certain books is obvious. Etymologically, epidemiae here has the meaning of visiting various places and not epidemic diseases.

Thessalian patients, described in the certain books, their illnesses and the respective treatments were reviewed in detail. This was followed by an historical, social and clinical analysis of all cases, in an effort to correlate at least some of them with the current medical knowledge.

References

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Results

Thessalian case reports were traced in Epidemiae 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, written from 420 B.C. till 348 B.C. Most cases are in the book Epidemiae 5. This volume was probably written by some Hippocrates' students after their teacher's death. Sixteen out of twenty four cases are from Larissa, five from Cranon, one from Farsala, one from Melivoia and one from Pherae (Fig 2).

Among these 24 cases there are two reports of general interest with information about the climate and nosology of the town Cranon (Fig. 2) and 22 reports about examined and treated patients. The social status and trade of these patients varies from aristocrats to slaves and they include 12 men and 10 women. Various professions are mentioned as butler, groom and writer. It is interesting, that the term Larisaeon, to define a citizen of Larissa, was used in those ancient times as it is today.

In all these reports there is a meticulous monitoring of the clinical symptoms and the urine's and feces' signs of the diseases. Out of the 22 cases 12 patients died. Retrospecting diagnosis is always risky. However, some are clearly stated like trauma, gangrene, epilepsy while others are obscure. Special attention is given to the color, consistency and opacity of urines. This is natural given the ancients' preoccupation with uroscopy, although Hippocrates is not very pedantic about it. Still his remarks about the correlation of the urine's sign and the outcome of the disease sound logical.

In two instances Hippocrates does not hesitate to be critical on other doctors' flaws but also admitting his own. The case of the 11 year old groom who suffered a professional accident, namely a head injury by the horse, has certain social interest.

Unexpected finding is his attitude towards the patient. He describes everything in detail but from a cool and distanced stance. There is not any sign of empathy from him who was later considered the champion of humanistic medicine.



Fig. 2. Map of the region Thessalia in central Greece. Larissa is placed in the middle of the Thessalian plane. Included are, except Larissa, all other towns of ancient Thessalia, where patients in this report came from.

Conclusions

The symptoms and treatments of the residents of Thessalia, described in the books "Epidemiae", do not differ from those reported in the remainder of the Hippocratic work. Once more we realize the deep faith of Hippocrates' medicine in rationalism and his rejection of every superstitious and theocratic view.

About ancient Larissa of the 5th century BC, we see that a considerable number of doctors practice medicine in the city. Patients are often young age, also children and pregnant women. High percentage of the diseases treated concern wounds and infections. Patients are equally often women or men and belong to all social classes. They may be free citizens or slaves. In addition, some useful information was gathered about names, professions, the financial and familial situation or the social status of patients in Larissa and Thessalia.