

Medicine in ancient Egypt

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‘It is enough to reach Egypt to find out immediately the existence of an amazing civilization’ – Albert Champdor describes the attraction of ancient Egypt through this phrase in his introduction to *‘The Book of the Dead’* [1]. The ancient Egyptian civilization had achievements in all fields, not only in the arts and architecture but also in the sciences of medicine, pharmacy, astronomy, and engineering. Egypt is still full of various inscriptions and scenes recorded on the walls of temples as well as tombs belonging to physicians, which mention their achievements and their role in the field of medicine.

All civilized creativities are from healthy bodies and minds that are burning with science; thus, the interest of ancient Egyptians in medicine was necessary and their progress in science was clear. Through the medical documents they have left us, their great interest in knowing the causes of a disease, its diagnosis, and treatment is known.

The Ebers Papyrus, dating back to c. 1550 BC, is among the oldest and most important medical papyri in ancient Egypt. It was purchased in 1873–1874 by Georg Moritz Ebers, and it is currently maintained at the Library of the University of Leipzig in Germany. The papyri of Hearst of Berlin of Edwin Smith and of Chester Beatty are also among the most important medical papyri discovered, including information on various diseases, medical prescriptions, medicinal herbs, magic spells, and amulets against evil spirits [2] (Fig. 1).

Ancient Egyptians could diagnose and deal with various diseases mentioned in those papyri, such as the diseases of head, nose, ear, throat, teeth, eyes, heart, anus, bones, chest, and abdominal tract as well as neurological and skin diseases. Such papyri show that in ancient Egypt it had been known that the

Figure 1



Part of Edwin Smith's Papyrus.

Figure 2



The Ebers Papyrus.

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Figure 3



Hsi Ra (third dynasty).

heart was a vital organ, and that a doctor when examining any part of the body had to know well about the heart. According to these documents, physicians had many ranks, and among the priests in ancient Egypt there was a priest bearing the title 'Senior Physician'. In Ebers Papyrus, for example, it is reported that the ancient Egyptian knew how to use green kohl (malachite) to treat certain eye diseases. It included the interest of kings in medicine, and it refers to some recipes for the treatment of some diseases [3] (Fig. 2).

Regarding teaching of medicine in ancient Egypt, there were no specific institutions for this purpose, but was carried out in temples in the great cities, in a place known as 'Pr-Ankh', which means the house of life.

In the ancient Egyptian language, the word 'swnw' refers to a physician, and according to the ancient Egyptian texts those who hold this title and hold this position should have been highly qualified and talented [4]. The physician called 'Hsi Ra', from the third dynasty (about 2700 BC), whose name means the one 'praised by Ra', is considered the oldest example of a physician in ancient Egypt. He was a dentist, and his grave was discovered in northern Saqqara more than a 100 years ago [5] (Fig. 3).

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