Mesopotamian Medicine and Medical Practices -
A Mesopotamian Research Project
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2nd Period
WHO?

Who can be eligible to practice medicine in ancient Mesopotamia? The Sumerians had spiritual ‘doctors’, then by 2500 B.C.E., real doctors appeared. Priests and priestesses had many duties and responsibilities, and in exchange they received respect, honor and comforts. The local priest were considered the doctors of the time. They also ran the school and became influential because of the importance of religion and their relationship with the gods. Priest shaved their heads and were the upper-class of society.

Inside a temple, a woman priestess
WHO, a continuation -
Women?

The polytheistic religion practiced by Mesopotamians included both gods and goddesses, women were also priestesses, some of them not only important, but powerful. A family might sell a daughter to the temple, and they were honored to have a priestess in the family. Families could also sell their daughters into prostitution or slavery. Prostitution, however, was not regarded as vile or degrading at that time. In fact, a form of sacred prostitution in the temples existed side by side with secular prostitution.
WHAT?
What did the ancient doctors study? With modern doctors the focus is on the hard sciences and strict adhesion to the study of anatomy rather than theology. But in mesopotamian culture, the medical students were classifying “demons”, the causes of diseases. The basic concepts of medicine were religious and taught and practiced by herb doctors (internists), knife doctors (surgeons) and spell doctors (psychiatrists).
The spiritual doctors believed illness was caused by demons entering the body of the afflicted person. Thus devised a number of way to exorcise the demon out through chants and magical spells.

They also believed that horrible tasting concoctions would drive the demon out, though some had some real medicinal value.
WHAT?

What were their medical practices? Witch doctors (“ashipu”) worked with physical healers (“asu”) in a mix of magic, religious imprecations, administration of plasters, and surgical procedures. Surgery consist of draining infections, controlled bleeding, performed amputations and trephinations (brain surgery).
“Asu” was accounted as a physician. Dealt with empirical application of medication. The asu generally relied on washing, bandaging, and making plaster. The Sumerians also recorded their cures which avoided surgery. “Wash the sick body part with beer. Then mix honey with crushed turtle shells to form a soothing paste. Oil the body to prevent the paste from sticking, and spread the paste onto the sick body part. People still died, some as early as 32.
Was medical attention available to everyone?

Fees for services were on a sliding scale depending on one’s social status. A doctor presiding over the birth of a noble was paid more than for a common birth. Prescriptions were on this same sliding scale and, whereas a doctor might be paid in gold for mixing a prescription for a prince, the payment for doing the same for a common person might be a bowl of soup or a clay cup.
Was medical attention available to everyone?

There is no evidence, however, that doctors refused to treat the poor and the same prescriptions were given, with the same ingredients, without regard for a patient’s social status. Prescriptions were ground by the doctor, usually, in the presence of the patient, while some chant was recited. A prescription from Babylon for an injury to the face reads: “If a man is sick with a blow on the cheek, pound together fir-turpentine, pine-turpentine, tamarisk, daisy, flour of Inninnu; mix in milk and beer in a small copper pan; spread on skin, bind on him, and he shall recover.”
HOW?
How was liability dealt with? Society still functioned under The Law Code of Hammurabi (c. 1700 BC). Thus in the event that a surgeon failed an operation, the code called for their hand to be cut off if the life of a person of high social order was lost as a result.
HOW, a continuation -

The Law Code of Hammurabi is the first ever recorded legislation or rules governing the practice of medicine. It also highlights that the physicians perform a service to the society treating ailments.
Bibliography


Worksheet

1. The _______ were considered the doctors of the time.
2. True or False: Prostitution was regarded as vile or degrading at that time.
3. But in mesopotamian culture, the medical students were classifying “_________”, the causes of diseases
4. Witch doctors (“_____”) worked with physical healers (“____”) in a mix of magic, religious imprecations, administration of plasters, and surgical procedures.
5. Surgery consist of draining infections, controlled bleeding, performed amputations and trephinations (_________).
6. People still died, some as early as ___.
7. True or False: A doctor presiding over the birth of a noble was paid more than for a common birth.
8. True or False: There is evidence, however, that doctors refused to treat the poor and the same prescriptions were given, with the same ingredients, without regard for a patient’s social status.
9. True or False: Thus in the event that a surgeon failed an operation, the code called for their hand to be cut off if the life of a person of high social order was lost as a result.
10. True or False: The Law Code of Hammurabi is not the first ever recorded legislation or rules governing the practice of medicine.