

HISTORY OF MEDICINE

ANCIENT GREEK PHYSICIANS' VIEWS ON CHILDREN'S ENTERITIS

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SUMMARY

Ancient Greek physicians recognized the symptoms of enteritis in children, proposed a therapeutic approach and pointed out the importance of nutrition. Hippocrates and Soranus of Ephesus and Aretaeus of Cappadocia dealt with the disease and described its symptoms and its seasonal appearance.

Key words: Hippocrates, history of gastroenterology, enteritis, dysentery, pediatrics

RÉSUMÉ

L'opinion des anciens médecins grecs sur l'entérite des enfants

Les anciens médecins grecs ont reconnu les symptômes d'entérite chez les enfants, ont proposé une approche thérapeutique et ont souligné l'importance de la nutrition. Hippocrate, Soranus d'Ephèse et Arétée de Cappadoce ont décrit les symptômes de l'entérite et son aspect saisonnier.

Mots-clés: Hippocrate, histoire de la gastroentérologie, entérite, dysenterie, pédiatrie

Children's diseases and their treatments occupied physicians since antiquity. They described enteritis in infants and children and recognized the seriousness of the disease at small ages. However, in ancient Greek medical literature, the pediatric element is scattered [1].

Hippocrates' views on enteritis and dysentery

In the 5th century BC, Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.) provided to science a rational and systemic basis (Fig. 1). In paediatrics, he correlated various children's diseases with age and climate. He said that during summer and autumn there are epidemics of dysentery which appear with vomiting, bowel movements and strangury, meaning the retention of urine which is not caused by a kidney condition [1]. The main characteristic of this urinal retention is referred as a drop by drop urination. Concerning the mortality of the disease he mentions: "Among people who lost their lives (suffering from gastrointestinal disorders), most of them were children and infants". Moreover, he insists that the only symptom that saved numerous patients from the death was when "strougaria was already apparent" [2]. The mortality

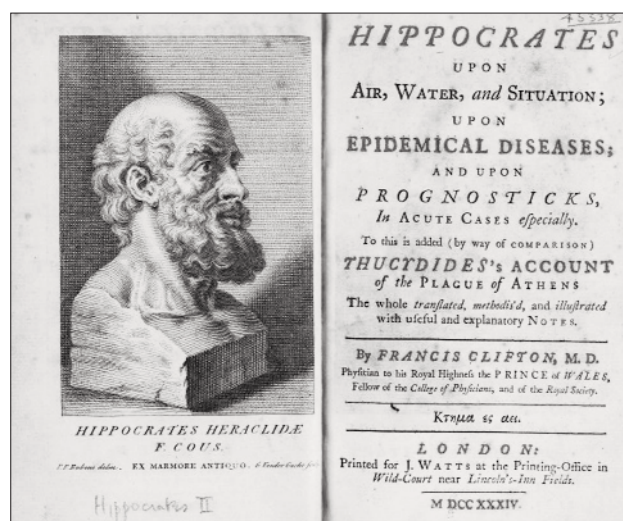


Figure 1 - Engraving of a bust of the Greek physician Hippocrates

rate of infants affected from enteritis and dysentery varies according to the circumstances of the season [1].

Vomiting has a great diagnostic and prognostic value. There is a clear distinction according to Hippocrates between a less harmful and a severe pathological vomiting. Bad smelling vomits have a negative prognosis because they predict that the patients will die [1]. Therapeutically Hippocrates suggests: "To stop vomiting, administrate a juice of ocinum in white wine, plus, water boiled with flour from spring wheat, or a juice from sweet and sour pomegranate mixed with honey" [2].

Hippocrates described also lientery pointing out that it is of "bad character when they are continued and protracted, both day and night, and when the dejections are very crude, or black, soft and fetid; for they occasion thirst and determine the fluids otherwise than to the bladder, give rise to ulcerations (aphtae?) in the mouth, redness and at the same time the belly is in a state of ferment and has a foul, wrinkled appearance externally." The indications of treatment according to his writings are: "the acute state, to determine the fluids to the urine, to relieve the body from its atrophy and change the colour of the skin [2].

Soranus of Ephesus on children's diarrhea

Soranus of Ephesus (98-138) was one of the most learned and lucid authors of antiquity. In his work he provides gives the most remarkable and complete account of pediatrics in antiquity, dealing with the birth, washing, swathing, and nutrition of the infant, the choice and regimen of the nurse, the weaning of the child, teething, tonsillitis, aphtae, skin eruptions and pruritus, catarrh and coughing, and gastrointestinal disorders [3].

For the treatment of enteritis, he proposes honey, mixed with goat's milk for the first three days. He states that the mother's breast must first be sucked by another infant before it is given to the new-born. If the mother's milk is not of the proper consistency, a professional wet-nurse is to be preferred. Infantile diarrhea is treated by injecting plantain juice with an aural syringe, or if the child is still taking the breast, by giving astringents to the nurse [1], [3].

Aretaeus of Cappadocia (ca. 2nd-3rd century AD)

Aretaeus of Cappadocia, a highly respected physician in his time, was born in Cappadocia, in eastern Asia Minor, studied medicine in Alexandria and practiced in Rome. Aretaeus is famous for his excellent accounts of various diseases [Fig.2].

On diarrhoea, he gives a special attention in the aetiology of the disease. He believed that: "children are subject to continued diarrhoea, from an ephemeral intemperance of food". He supported the theory of the climatic changes on diseases aetiology mentioning: "summer engen-



Figure 2 - Engraved portrait of Aretaeus of Cappadocia

ders the disease more than any other of the seasons; autumn next; and the coldest season, winter, also, if the heat be almost extinguished". Finally, he sustained that the increased consumption of cold water could exacerbate the affection [4].

CONCLUSION

Ancient Greek physicians recognized the symptoms, the danger of the disease at small ages as well as the importance of suitable feeding. They gave specific attention to the climate changes on diseases aetiology and proposed mainly herbal based drugs.

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