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A GENERAL HISTORY OF NURSING

by

LUCY RIDGELY SEYMER

M.A.(OXON.), S.R.N.



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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

IN any historical sketch of an ancient and almost world-wide art which is still rapidly developing, omission is inevitable. If in this process things of importance have here been left out or treated too briefly, I can but plead the difficulty of compressing into these pages so vast a subject. This is an attempt to present in historical perspective an outline of nursing development down to the present day; how inadequately it has been carried out I am only too well aware.

The bibliography of nursing history is not large. Miss Nutting's and Miss Dock's monumental work can never be superseded, but the fact that nursing has advanced with giant strides, especially since 1919, seems to justify fresh efforts to summarize its achievements.

I have received suggestions and hints from many quarters, but should like to tender special thanks to Mrs. Carter and to Mr. L. de Gielgud of the League of Red Cross Societies, to Miss Cowlin and Miss Rundle of the College of Nursing, who have helped me with criticism; to Mrs. Bedford Fenwick and Miss Lloyd Still, as well as to my parents and my husband who have given me unsparingly of their time and advice. I am indebted for illustrations to the Belgian Federation of Nurses, to Mrs. Breckinridge of the Frontier Nursing Service, to M. Vuilleumier, Director of *La Source*, to the *Nursing Times*, the *International Nursing Review*, the College of Nursing, Messrs. John Lane, the Middlesex Hospital and the League of Red Cross Societies. My thanks are also due to Miss Nina D. Gage, who revised the book for the American edition and made many valuable additions and corrections. Finally I must thank Miss C. Reimann, Secretary of the International Council of Nurses, without whose invaluable help in using the Council's unique library at Geneva this book could never have been written.

L. R. S.

1932

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

SINCE this book was written another world war has retarded the progress of nursing education in some countries. But it has also further stimulated a world-wide interest in problems of health. The difficulty of tracing development over the vast field of present-day nursing without omission is greater than it was before, and I am fully conscious of failures in this respect. They are in part inevitable when attempting to cover an ever-growing subject still within the compass of a single volume.

Once more I offer grateful thanks to the many who have helped me complete this new edition.

L. R. S.

1949

ILLUSTRATIONS IN THE SECOND EDITION

MY thanks are due to the following for permission to use these photographs: to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Pl. 4); the *Illustrated London News* (Pl. 19); the Society for Cultural Relations with Soviet Russia (Pl. 23); the London County Council (Pl. 22); the Queen's Institute of District Nursing (Pl. 27 and 34); the U.S. Public Health Service (Pl. 30); the Victorian Bush Nursing Association (Pl. 32); the Matron-in-Chief, Princess Mary's Royal Air Force Nursing Service (Pl. 39); and to the Editor of the *Nursing Mirror* for the Frontispiece.

NOTE

WHERE a book or other publication is referred to more than once, the full title, etc., will be found in the Bibliography. Explanations of abbreviations are also listed there.

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[Nursing Mirror Photograph

FLORENCE NIGHTINGALE, O.M.

1820-1910

From a photograph taken at Claydon in 1891

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CHAPTER I

ORIGINS: EGYPT, MESOPOTAMIA, CHINA, PALESTINE, INDIA, GREECE, ROME

Among the salient features of primitive society, whether in ancient Egypt or in modern Uganda, is ignorance as to disease; the sick are regarded as victims, not of Nature's laws, but of superhuman malevolence, divine or diabolic—a sinister conception which it has taken many centuries to dispel. In the early times when man's skill was held to avail but little against the power of demons, it is natural that the physician and the nurse should scarcely have existed, and that even when existing in rudimentary form they should have been barely, if at all, differentiated. Hence though in most parts even of the civilized world both the theory and the practice of trained nursing are surprisingly recent, the historian of nursing must begin by examining the medical notions current among ancient peoples; from their crude conceptions of the healing art have originated all modern methods of caring for the sick, both those that we call medical or surgical and those that we class as nursing.

In order to understand the medical ideas of the earliest civilizations known to us, we shall begin by investigating the records of Egypt, Mesopotamia and China; those of Palestine, India, Greece and Rome will follow in due course.

I. EGYPT

The first place must be given to Egypt, because in its dry sands were preserved the papyri containing our most complete examples of ancient medical literature. Like other peoples of antiquity the Egyptians regarded disease as due to causes partly natural, partly supernatural; in Egypt, as in India, China and primitive Greece, medicine was held to be of divine origin. A famous physician, Imhotep, who lived about 3500 B.C., came by degrees to be regarded as a god, and in later days was identified by the Greeks with their god of healing, Asklepios. The name Imhotep means 'He who

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cometh in peace', and on the wall of his temple at Philae (erected under the Ptolemies in the third century B.C.) he is called 'the good physician of gods and men, a kind and merciful god, assuaging the sufferings of those in pain, healing the diseases of men, giving peaceful sleep to the restless and suffering'.¹ A recent authority has said :

'Medicine branched off from magic and began its independent career early in Egyptian history, for already in the Pyramid Age there are records of men bearing the title of physician as distinct from that of magician.'²

Yet in common with other primitive folk the first Egyptians tended to confuse medicine and magic. It is not therefore surprising to find in the medical papyri prescriptions interspersed with magical incantations and charms. The most complete and the best preserved is the Papyrus Ebers, called after the German Egyptologist Georg Ebers, who published it in 1874. The writing is marvellously clear ; it dates from about 1500 B.C., but many portions of its contents are thought to be derived from much older sources. It is a veritable encyclopaedia of prescriptions for treating disease in every form ; some are compounded of drugs well known at the present day, such as myrrh, ricinus, dill, caraway, while others call for fantastic ingredients, such as fat of a mouse, blood of a bat, etc., which can only have been recommended for magical reasons. The Egyptian pharmacopoeia included innumerable drugs, some of which cannot now be satisfactorily identified ; and the apothecaries mentioned in Exodus, xxx, 25, 35 and xxxvii, 29 were almost certainly Egyptians practising their famous 'art'.

The most interesting parts of the Papyrus Ebers are the sections on the eye and ear and the last section of all, which treats of tumours. A few examples of the prescriptions will suffice : ³

'Another (remedy) for driving away pain. Ointment made from the seeds of ricinus. Anoint therewith the person who is afflicted with sores that emit a foul discharge. . . . The sores will disappear by anointing thus for 10 days, anointing very early in the morning in order to dispel them. A true remedy (proved) millions of times. Another for preventing the hair (*i.e.* the lashes) from pricking the eye. Frankincense 1. Lizard's blood 1. Bat's blood 1. Clip the hair. Apply until (the eye) is well.'

¹ R. Caton, *Imhotep* (Harveian Oration, 1904, p. 5). The precise dates of Imhotep are uncertain.

² Dawson, p. 59.

³ *Pap. Ebers*, 27, 11-14, quoted Dawson, p. 114.

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That these recipes were not merely theoretical but were actually used is suggested by such marginal notes as 'a true remedy'. The Edwin Smith papyrus, which is on surgical subjects, is remarkable because it not only tells of the treatment of wounds but comments on their nature and what organs are affected by them, so that 'to this document must be accorded the honour of being the earliest known scientific book'.¹ Other important medical papyri exist in Berlin, London and New York, while the earliest of all is on veterinary subjects.²

Excavations have up to the present yielded no trace of any building that can definitely be identified as a hospital, nor do we know if, apart from midwives who were plentiful, there were any men or women corresponding to nurses. Nursing was then most probably done, as much later it was in Greece and Rome, within each household by the women and slaves. Yet we do know that the Egyptians, especially in the temples of Imhotep, practised incubation, namely the custom of passing the night in a god's temple with the hope of obtaining in dreams advice as to treatment.³ Very little is actually preserved of Imhotep's largest temple at Memphis, yet a writer says:

'It doubtless consisted of a number of halls and annexes, some of which would be devoted to the worship of the deity Imhotep. Others served for clinical purposes and for the instruction of budding magician-physicians, yet others for the preparation and preservation of the *materia medica* which we know from the Ebers and other medical papyri was extraordinarily rich. At least one annexe was used for incubation or for the accommodation of patients and suppliants.'⁴

Hygiene was at that date in advance of medicine; ⁵ the Egyptians were very particular in their ablutions and as to the cleanliness of their dress, which was always of linen, and from the earliest times they practised circumcision. Herodotus (born 484 B.C.) tells us 'For three successive days in each month they purge the body by means of emetics and clysters which is done out of a regard for health, since they have a persuasion that every disease to which men are liable is occasioned by the substances whereon they feed, and in other ways also they are next to the Libyans the healthiest people in the world'

¹ Dawson, p. 74.

² For further details see Dawson, pp. 75-87.

³ For details see J. B. Hurry, *Imhotep* (1925), pp. 49-56 and 105-111.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 88.

⁵ Neuburger, p. 52.

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(ii, 77). The Egyptians also recognized the importance of an adequate system of drainage, of a good water supply ¹ and even of the inspection of slaughter houses :² from them was derived much of the rigid hygienic regulation of the Jews.

Even in antiquity Egyptian medicine was famous ; Homer alludes in the *Odyssey* (iv, 229) to the drugs of Egypt, and Herodotus (ii, 84) speaks of the fact that in his time the Egyptians had a different doctor for every part of the body—the earliest ‘specialists’. We know too from him (iii, 1) that Cyrus, King of Persia (d. 529 B.C.), employed ‘the most skilful of all the Egyptian eye-doctors’, and that Darius (521–485 B.C.) had at his court ‘certain Egyptians whom he reckoned the best-skilled physicians in all the world’ (iii, 129). Why, with such extensive knowledge of drugs, the Egyptians never evolved an adequate theory of medicine, has been asked by many writers ; one says :³ ‘The curious thing about Egyptian medicine is that it never developed into a scientific system.’ The answer to this enigma probably lies in the fact that as medical knowledge was accumulated it was more and more taken over by the priests, who supervised and formalized the treatment of disease as part of their functions. The compilations of priestly medical lore were called by the Greeks the Hermetic books,⁴ and physicians were bound by the directions contained in them, as we see from the following passage (i. 82) of Diodorus Siculus (c. 40 A.D.) :

‘To prevent diseases the Egyptians treat their bodies with clysters and fastings and emetics, sometimes every day, sometimes every third day. For they say that the worst thing is to exceed the nourishment digested by the body and that from this excess come diseases, so that the aforesaid treatment by destroying the beginnings of the disease procures good health. . . . They give the treatments which are established by written law and were collected by many distinguished ancient doctors. And if the doctors follow the recognized laws from the Sacred Book and yet are unable to heal the sick person they are guiltless and absolved from all blame. But if they do anything contrary to the written laws they endure the death penalty, as the lawgiver would think that few persons would be cleverer than the treatment observed for so long a time and compiled by the best masters of the Art.’

This is corroborated by Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.), who says : ‘In Egypt

¹ Garrison, p. 51.

² Neuburger, p. 51.

³ E. W. Budge, *The Syriac Book of Medicines* (1913), Introd., p. cxlii.

⁴ Neuburger, p. 35.

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physicians were allowed after the third day to make an alteration in the treatment—if they did so before, it was at their own risk' (*Polit.* iii, 15, 4). Such a remark clearly implies that before the third day the medical treatment was merely the official one mentioned by Diodorus, and that nothing was entrusted to the doctor's own responsibility. The rigidity of the rules revealed in these passages must have tended to cripple all genuine medical progress, for under such a system research and experiment were impossible.

2. BABYLONIA AND ASSYRIA

We know from surviving monuments that the Babylonians were learned mathematicians and astronomers, that they originated the division of time into months, days and minutes, and made great advances in architecture; it would be strange indeed if such a people had not also attained some skill in medicine. A very primitive stage is recorded by Herodotus (i, 197), who describes how, 'as they have no physicians', the sick were brought out into the market place in order that passers-by who had suffered from a like disease might stop and give advice as to treatment. How long this empirical stage lasted we do not know, but by the time of the Hammurabi Code, about 2500 B.C., physicians already existed. These famous laws are inscribed on a pillar of diorite and preserved in the Louvre, Paris. Definite rules regarding the physician's fees are laid down as follows:

'If a physician has performed a serious operation upon a man with the copper lancet, and has brought the man back to life, or if he has opened the cataract of a man with the copper lancet and has brought the eye back to life he shall receive a fee of 10 shekels.'¹ The above operations were to cost respectively five shekels on a freedman and two on a slave. At an early stage the Babylonians recognized the contagiousness of leprosy and forbade lepers to come within their borders.² The regard for 'omens' and for 'lucky and unlucky' numbers originates with them. The physicians, who belonged to the priestly class and whose office is thought to have been hereditary, were not allowed to touch the sick on 'dangerous' days, the numbers seven and forty-nine being regarded as specially perilous.³ They believed also in the power of the stars to influence

¹ C. H. W. Johns, *The Oldest Code of Laws in the World* (1903), p. 5; Budge, *op. cit.*, Introd., p. clxxiii. Hammurabi's exact date is uncertain.

² Garrison, p. 64, quoting Sudhoff.

³ M. Dumon, *Notice sur la profession de médecin d'après les textes Assyro-Babyloniens* in *Journal Asiatique*, ix (1897), pp. 318-326.

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human actions and even disease, e.g. 'When Mercury is in the ascendant there will be deaths'.¹ The Assyrians, who succeeded the Babylonians, have like the Egyptians handed down to us medical texts of great antiquity; these are engraved on clay tablets in cuneiform script. The greatest number (now in the British Museum, London) come from Kuyunjik (Nineveh), and are from the library of King Asurbanipal (668-628 B.C.), but some are believed to be copied from much earlier originals. The fragments, on seventeen tablets, of a medical treatise called 'When thou goest into the house of the sick' have been preserved.² The prescriptions are very similar to those in the Egyptian papyri, especially by their mixture of rational therapeutic remedies with purely magical devices. It will be sufficient to quote as an example:

'If a man's head is full of scabies and itch thou shalt bray sulphur, mix it in cedar oil, anoint him.'³

Or this in contrast:

'... a thread thou shalt spin, double it twice, tie 7 knots. As thou tiest (them) thou shalt recite the charm, bind on his temples and he shall recover.'⁴

The priest-physicians had to know all the correct rites connected with these magical formulae and 'could hide behind the action of the gods in case of failure or error'.⁵ Many charms and remedies which have come down to us show that eye diseases were common in Mesopotamia then as now. We often find the heading 'Incantation for a sick eye', and the following prescription is typical:

'If a man has a burning headache affecting his eyes, which are bloodshot, take one third of a measure of SIKHLI crushed and powdered, and knead with cassia-juice; wrap it around his head, attach it (with a bandage) and do not remove it for three days.'⁶

As in Egypt so in Mesopotamia the scanty records tell us nothing about nursing as such, nor have we the archaeological remains of any building that can be recognized as a hospital. But for nurses it is of interest to note that, although every drug has not as yet been identified, the Assyrian pharmacopoeia was as all-embracing as the Egyptian.

¹ Neuburger, p. 28.

² Dumon, *art. cit.*, p. 325.

³ R. C. Thompson, *Assyrian Medical Texts* (1923), p. 2, No. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33, No. 42.

⁵ Dumon, *art. cit.*, p. 325.

⁶ M. Jastrow, *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Section, Hist. of Medicine, vol. viii, pt. 2, p. 109.