The Importance of Having Medical Knowledge as a Layman
The Hippocratic treatise *Affections* in the context of the *Hippocratic Corpus*

Pilar Pérez Cañizares

**Summary**

The aim of this paper is to explore various aspects regarding the Hippocratic treatise *Affections*, mainly its relationships to other Hippocratic treatises concerning genre and the ideology of the author, with the aim of placing this work within its scientific and sociocultural context.

In the quotation above, we can see how Galen distinguished between works meant for and written by specialists, and writings for lay people written by non-specialists. In this sense, Galen conceives the difference between Thucydides’ description of the epidemic of plague in Athens and Hippocrates’ accounts of diseases in the books of *Epidemics* as a clear disparity of textual genre. This division between technical and non-technical literature, with clear and insurmountable boundaries, has undoubtedly influenced many modern interpretations concerning the readers of these writings and their capacity or not to understand scientific texts.

The Hippocratic treatise *Affections*¹ can be incorporated to complement this duality concerning both author and targeted public, as

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¹ *Affections* (*De affectionibus, peri paithon*) is a nosological work of about 60 pages of Greek text (in the Littré-numeration), which already in Antiquity was transmitted as a part of the *Hippocratic Corpus*. 
it is the work of a medical specialist whose aim is to transmit the medical knowledge every intelligent layman should posses. In this sense, *Affections* is unique among the Hippocratic writings in that it presents itself as a manual for lay people and not for physicians. It provides therefore essential information on what knowledge and skills the educated layman in Ancient Greece was expected to possess in the management of health and it is mainly this aspect that will be examined here. The writing includes a systematic discussion of diseases and their treatment. It then deals with a number of dietetic modes of treatment (foods, drinks, baths etc.) applied to a variety of diseases. It also refers several times to a discussion of drug treatment and drug preparation, and ideological statements are placed among the description of diseases.

My aim here is to focus on this distinctive attitude of the author of *Affections*, as far as his consideration of the intellectual capacities of his readers are concerned. I shall do this by means of a selection and close examination of some passages of the tract and their differences and affinities to other Hippocratic authors’ positions.

As I have already mentioned, *Affections* is the only work of the *Hippocratic Corpus* that is explicitly intended for lay readers rather than for specialists, as the author states at the very beginning:

ἀνδρα χρή, ὅστις ἐστι συνετός, λογισάμενον ὃτι τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πλείστου ἄξιον ἐστιν ἡ ύγιεία, ἐπίστασθαι ἀπὸ τῆς ἑωτοῦ γνώμης ἐν τῇ νοῦσοιν ὠφελέσθαι ἐπίστασθαι δὲ τὰ ὑπὸ τῶν ἰητῶν καὶ λεγόμενα καὶ προσφέρόμενα πρὸς τὸ σώμα ἑαυτῷ καὶ διαγινώσκειν ἐπίστασθαι δὲ τοῦτων ἕκαστα ἐς ὁσον εἰκός ἰδιώτην.

Any man who is intelligent must, on considering that health is of the utmost value to human beings, have the personal understanding necessary to help himself in diseases, and be able to understand and to judge what physicians say and what they administer to his body, being versed in each of these matters to a degree reasonable for a layman. Hipp. *Aff.* 1 (5,6 Potter; 6.208 L.).

Nevertheless some early scholarship\(^3\) considered the last part of the Hippocratic treatise *Nature of Man*, edited separately by Littré under the name of *Regimen in Health*, to be another example of this genre of medical works, as its dietetic advice is directed first of all to lay people.

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2 In this paper I have made use of the texts and translations of the Loeb Classical Library by Potter and Jones.

3 See for instance the only modern commentary of *Affections* by Wittenzellner (1969).