Doctors’ Literacy and Papyri of Medical Content

Ann Ellis Hanson

Summary

The *Hippocratic Corpus* testifies to the existence of literate doctors, as well as to literate laymen interested in medicine, by the close of the fifth century BC. It is only in later Antiquity, however, that one can begin to speak with confidence about medical literacy encompassing a wide range of specific physicians and a lay public with valetudinarian interests. Evidence from the Roman province of Egypt, when coupled with testimony from Galen and others, is particularly helpful in the effort to sketch a portrait of writers and readers for medical texts. Of particular interest are the joins between the medical writers who have come down to us through the manuscript traditions, many of them practicing and lecturing to the elites of Rome, Alexandria, and eventually Constantinople, and the more ordinary practitioners and their students, friends, and neighbors in the towns and villages of Roman Egypt.

My paper surveys texts on papyrus and other materials that bear witness to medical literacy: first, private letters that discuss medical matters; second, didactic texts that played a role in doctors’ education, such as the catechisms (*erōtapokrisēs*) and medical definitions; and third, collections of recipes, some of which *receptaria* were once rolls of many columns, while others are but a single sheet with one or two recipes. The some four hundred recipes written down in Roman and Byzantine Egypt emphasize the degree to which the same or similar therapeutic medicaments are shared with medical authors of the manuscript traditions from Dioscorides and Galen to Oribasius, Aetius, and Paul of Aegina.

Medicine was a craft learned at the side of a skilled practitioner for centuries before Greek doctors began to write the treatises of the *Hippocratic Corpus* in the final decades of the fifth century BC. Thereafter, medical literature multiplied in genres and formats, in scope and sophistication, and learning medicine, both theoretical and therapeutic, from the writings of earlier physicians was increasingly
commonplace.¹ Galen recognized both oral and written means to acquire an education in medicine, claiming, on the one hand, that a doctor’s competence could be evaluated by interrogating him as to what he knew about the precepts of Hippocrates and other famous physicians of yesteryear. On the other hand, Galen himself taught pupils face-to-face and lectured to friends and associates who wanted to know medicine, underscoring the importance of direct encounters with the experienced physician.² The sick-room was often crowded not only with concerned family members and friends, but also by a host of medical practitioners, their helpers, and curious onlookers. As the physician observed his patient, touched him, took his pulse, asked him, or others in the sick-room, about the past history of his illness — all with the purpose of arriving at correct prognosis and requisite therapies — the other professionals and laymen observed. Discussion and criticism, however, often followed the initial pronouncements, as Galen’s stories of such encounters at Rome emphasize.³ Yet, the more a learner’s head was filled with medical information from the writings of the past, ta pro iatrikēs, the more likely he was to profit from face-to-face instruction from skilled professionals and to acquire ta iatrika for himself.⁴ The Hippocratic Aphorisms and Epidemics came to play a central role within medical education, whatever roles their authors originally intended for the treatises, because they furnished principles in easily remembered format and specific examples.⁵ The Galenic Corpus preserves not only Galen’s own advice on how and when to read his own treatises, some of them dictated to scribes skilled in shorthand, but also teaching texts he did not author, such as and

¹ For Greece of the fifth/fourth centuries BC, see Lonie (1983) 145-161; also Veggetti (2004) 237-251. For the flourishing of medical writing in Hellenistic and Roman periods, part of the new interest in technical manuals in many fields, see Harris (1989) 126-127.
² Contrast e.g. Galen, De optimo medico cognoscendo 5 (68-70 Iskandar) with Galen, De opt. doctr. 4.4 (104 Barigazzi; 1.50-51 K.). Cf. also Hanson (1998a) 22-53.
³ For example, Galen, De praeecogn. 1.6-10, 2.1-27 (70-72, 74-82 Nutton; 14.602-613 K.).
⁴ Cf. Pl. Phdr. 269a 3: books can teach ta pro iatrikēs, but not ta iatrika.
⁵ Duffy (1984) 21-27. Exegesis of important texts was the standard teaching method in the medical schools of late antique Alexandria, and surviving commentaries on Hippocratic Epidemics and Aphorisms highlight their prominence, such as Stephanus, On Hippocrates’ ‘Aphorisms’ and John of Alexandria, On Hippocrates’ ‘Epidemics VI’, fragmentary in Greek, with more full text in Latin translation.