The Didactic Letters Prefacing Marcellus’ *On Drugs* as Evidence for the Expertise and Reputation of Doctors in the Late Roman Empire

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*Summary*

The didactic letters prefacing Marcellus’s *On Drugs* are examined. It appears that one reason for writing such didactic letters was to equip the addressee with sufficient knowledge to enable him to avoid consulting a doctor, since there was great dissatisfaction with the quality of service rendered and the fees charged by doctors. The letters in the collection will be shown to represent various levels of healers, from the professional city doctor, to the army doctor, to the educated layman. They will also be scrutinized for evidence of the level of expertise of doctors in the late fourth and fifth centuries. Finally, the evidence will be compared with the criteria set some two centuries earlier by Galen in his blueprint for the examination of physicians.

*Introduction*

Didactic letters feature quite prominently in the Latin medical corpus, either as prefaces to collections of pharmaceutical recipes or as theoretical treatises in their own right. The focus in this article will be on the group of eight letters prefacing the huge recipe collection which constitutes Marcellus’s *On Drugs*, published early in the fifth century AD. My aim is to try to glean from the letters what the contemporary views of doctors were, and also what knowledge and expertise a doctor in the late Roman Empire (fourth/fifth century) was supposed to have had. In order to see this information in perspective, it will then be compared with Galen’s blueprint for the examination of physicians, the *On Recognizing the Best Physician*, written some two centuries earlier.

The corpus of the Marcellus letters is in many respects unique in Latin literature: it is the earliest deliberate collection of its kind in Latin
medical literature1 (as opposed to medieval times when collections of letters on medical topics assembled in one manuscript by various copyists were a common phenomenon),2 and its compilation was the work of a single person from whose pen it contains only one dedicatory letter, the rest being letters on medical topics by other authors.3

The letters serving as source for this investigation are the following:4

1) Marcellus to his sons;
2) Largius Designianus to his sons;
3) Pseudo-Hippocrates to King Antiochus;
4) Pseudo-Hippocrates to Maecenas;
5) Pseudo-Plinius Secundus to his friends;
6) Cornelius Celsus/Scribonius Largus to C. Iulius Callistus;
7) Pseudo-Cornelius Celsus to Pullius Natalis;
8) Vindicianus to the emperor Valentinian.

This collection of letters was chosen as point of departure since it seems to be fairly representative of the very diverse medical scene in the late fourth and early fifth century AD: the authors were of different origin (e.g. Africa, Rome and Gaul); belonged to different levels of society (Marcellus, Scribonius and Vindicianus); practiced medicine on different levels (a city practice, a country ‘clinic’, and a layman’s advice), and had different objectives.

The identity of the authors and addressees

A few words on the identity of the authors and addressees are necessary:5 Marcellus, the compiler of the collection, was a native of

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1 In Greek medical literature there is a corpus of 24 pseudo-epigraphic letters supposed to have been written by Hippocrates, to Hippocrates or about Hippocrates, composed in the Roman era between the first century BC and the first century AD; this was, however, not a deliberate collection, but a compilation of letters on a common topic (Jouanna [1999] 7-8 and 396-398).
2 Wiedeman (1976) 55.
3 Famous letter collections in Latin literature are those of e.g. Seneca and Pliny the Younger, but these consist solely of letters by the authors themselves.
4 The text of Niedermann and Liechtenhan (1968) 2-53 has been used.
5 Only two, perhaps three, of the letters are authentic, written by historical personages to real addressees (i., ii and viii), the rest are either spurious (iii and iv), or pseudonyms were used (v and vii), or were incorrectly attributed to the author (vi). Discussed in detail in Cilliers (2006) 91-110.