Book Reviews

Georgia Petridou and Chiara Thumiger (eds.)


“The history of patients has come of age” writes Michael Stolberg (514) in the epilogue to this important edited volume on patients in the ancient world – an ancient world that is mostly Greek and Roman, with one incursion into the medieval Arabo-Islamic world (Pauline Koetschet, Chapter 7). Historians of early modern and modern medicine have enthusiastically answered the call made by Roy Porter in his seminal 1985 article “The Patient’s View: Doing Medical History from Below” (Theory and Society, 14, 175–98) to put the patient at the centre of medical history. Ancient historians have had a harder job: apart from the famous Sacred Discourses by the orator Aelius Aristides (second century AD), examined in two chapters of this volume (Georgia Petridou, Chapter 20; and Katherine D. van Schaik, Chapter 21), extensive patient accounts from antiquity do not survive. Most of our sources were produced by physicians. These doctors had no real obligation to centre their narratives on patients, even though they were dependent on them for their knowledge and their living (see Chapter 12 by Giulia Ecca on the medical fee). But could ancient physicians completely erase patients from their writing? Or, as John Z. Wee provocatively asks, “Why is the patient in the medical text? Are patient identities really necessary in medical writing?” (139). The answer to that question is of course negative, as Chiara Thumiger points out: “it is indeed impossible to write about someone’s suffering without the writer making space, in a way or another, for the voice of the suffering individual” (134). That subjective voice, which physicians often downplay or dismiss, can still be found in between the lines of ancient medical writing. Further, in antiquity, the boundary between the physician and the non-physician was rather blurred; in the absence of any licensing system, lay medical practitioners could become very successful with
their healing herbs and other remedies (see Chapter 17 by Jane Draycott). Finally, every physician at times became patient – the ideal type of patient according to Galen (see Courtney Roby, p. 314).

After a particularly useful introduction in which Georgia Petridou and Chiara Thumiger outline the existing research on patients in the ancient world, the book contains twenty chapters divided into five thematic sections. It is, of course, impossible to do justice to all chapters, which are for the vast majority of excellent quality. Beside the Hippocratic authors of the *Epidemics* to which Section 2 is devoted (Chapters 3 to 5), ancient authors covered in the chapters include Rufus of Ephesus (Melinda Letts, Chapter 2), Soranus of Ephesus (Lesley Bolton, Chapter 9; Amber Porter, Chapter 10); Aelius Aristides (see above); Galen (Susan Mattern, Chapter 6; Roby, Chapter 11; John Wilkins, Chapter 16); and John Zacharias Aktouraios (Petros Bouras-Vallianatos, Chapter 15). Beside medical treatises, attention is paid to epigraphical evidence (such as the epitaph for Lucius Minicius Anthimianus examined by Lutz Graummann and Manfred Horstmannshoff in Chapter 1), visual evidence (relating to ancient representations of doctor-patient dialogue in Patricia Baker, Chapter 14), and papyrological evidence (Draycott, Chapter 17).

One of the strengths of the volume is that it focuses on patients in all their diversity. Bolton (Chapter 9) examines infants as patients (but I note that, unfortunately, no chapter is devoted to old age). Jennifer Kosak (Chapter 8) concentrates on gender. She notes that the doctor-patient relationship is often based on touch, but one that is “shaped by inequality” (249). One would perhaps expect that women were treated differently in such power relationships. Yet, Kosak does not find evidence for this in the Hippocratic Corpus. She concludes that the male body, when sick, cannot “perform [its] masculine roles” – the sick becomes in some way associated with the female (261). Much attention is also given to the patient who is affected with mental troubles or illnesses (Colin Webster, Chapter 5; Susan Mattern, Chapter 6; Koetschet, Chapter 7). Webster’s piece on voice pathologies in the Hippocratic *Epidemics* is particularly original in this respect. It does not examine mental illnesses per se, but rather instances in which patients’ ability to speak “normally” are affected by sickness – those occasions when speech becomes “quasi-excreta of the mouth” (166).

The volume is produced to the highest standards, with excellent indices (*locorum* and *rerum*). My only small quibble is that Latin and Greek passages are sometimes in the main body of the text, sometimes in the footnotes – there is no consistency. This volume is a significant contribution to the field, one that will inform future research for a very long time. The editors have done an