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## **Philosophy and Medicine in Ancient Greece**

### **The Importance of Diet in Hippocratic Medical Practices**

In Ancient Greece many different theories of how medicine should have been practiced were commonly debated among physicians and philosophers. At the time, there was not a clear distinction between the two fields, so it was argued whether medicine should be approached philosophically, or if it should be based on medical observations. An important physician of the time named Hippocrates believed in approaching medicine in the later method mentioned. He developed important techniques pertaining to diet and its modification to treat patients. His observations lead to practices that became commonly used by the many physicians that followed his school of thought. His theories gave rise to the Hippocratic Oath which was recited by physicians of the time who had been trained enough to practice medicine. An important component of the Hippocratic Oath says, "I will apply dietetic measures for the benefit of the sick according to my ability and judgment."<sup>1</sup> This statement makes it evident that the regulation of diet and regimen was essential to the Hippocratic medical practice. This significance is highlighted in several essays that were written by Hippocrates and his followers. An examination of these essays and their references to diet will be evaluated to determine the importance of diet and its modifications, and how these conclusions based on observation shifted medical practice from philosophical theories to practices based on observations.

Ludwig Edelstein analyzes the Hippocratic Oath in the book [Ancient Medicine](#). He thoroughly evaluates the connections between the Oath and common Pythagorean beliefs. He states, "The sequence of the various parts of the healing art in the Pythagorean doctrine is the

same as it is in the Hippocratic Oath, dietetics coming first, pharmacology next, surgery last.”<sup>2</sup> Since diet was the least invasive and most natural treatment at the time, analyzing and altering diet was the first approach taken by physicians when treating the sick. This natural approach to medicine is reiterated in the essay *Early Greek Science* where it says, “He [the doctor] tried first and foremost to preserve health, generally conceived as a balance between opposites, and when this balance was upset, he largely relied on nature to effect its own cure, concentrating his efforts to help, or at least not to hinder, this process.”<sup>3</sup> It is likely that regimen alteration was the preferred treatment by Hippocratic doctors since it was the most natural and least invasive of the most common treatments of the time.

The value of diet and its connection to the natural state of man is also emphasized in the third paragraph of the essay *On Ancient Medicine*. The author argues that men used to have diets like that of animals, and ate unrefined, natural products from the earth. However, as humans evolved, “they suffered much and severely from this long and brutish diet,”<sup>4</sup> and as a result, they developed diets that were very different than that of animals.

That same paragraph, the author talks about the similarities of nature and man. He says “Considering that the stronger things Nature would not be able to manage if administered, and that from such things pains, diseases, and death would arise, but such as Nature could manage, that from them food, growth, and health would arise.”<sup>5</sup> Even though it is not clear exactly what types of food Nature was able to tolerate, the author emphasizes the close relationship men had with nature and how their diet was influenced by it.

It was believed that disease was not always caused by the foods consumed. In the essay *Nature of Man*, Hippocrates clarifies this. He says, “Regimen would not be the cause [of illness], when no matter what regimen they have followed all men are attacked by the same diseases.”<sup>6</sup>

Here he makes the distinction between food bourn illnesses and air bourn ones. He clarifies that when different diseases arose in individuals who had dissimilar diets the cause of those illnesses was most likely the types of food each sick person followed. The cure to this type of diseases was an adjustment in diet which was correlated to the patient's age and physical conditions.

When treating air bourn illnesses it was necessary to reduce the amount of food intake of every patient. It was important for this reduction to be done gradually, so it would not result in a different type of disease due to lack of nutritional consumption. It was believed that regimen needed to be adjusted when either type of disease, either food bourn or air bourn, was acquired. On the contrary, breathing patterns only needed to be adjusted when air bourn illnesses were contracted. This distinction reiterates the importance of diet in the Hippocratic medical practices. Even though the main focus of the essay *Nature of Man* is not diet, this subject is mentioned in a way that emphasizes the significance given to diet by the physicians of the time.

In the essay *Early Greek Science*, there is an entire section devoted to the Hippocratic writers. Here the author talks about the correlation between diet and medical treatment. He mentions, "The methods of treatment mentioned in the Hippocratic Corpus consist of a very few general types... and, especially, the control of 'regimen', that is diet and exercise."<sup>7</sup> Even though diet was not the only way to treat diseases by Hippocratic physicians, it was the original element doctors analyzed to determine whether this was the cause of the disease. Based on their conclusions from evaluating the patient's diet, they would decide whether regimen adjustment was the best way to treat the disease.

The author of this essay also mentions that in one of the accounts cited in "Epidemics," "Pythion... had a violent rigor and high fever as the result of strain, exhaustion and insufficient attention to his diet."<sup>8</sup> Once again it is emphasized that it was firmly believed that inappropriate

diets were the cause of many diseases. Illnesses contracted as a result of a poor diet were not as severe to begin with, but commonly escalated to acute diseases. In this particular case, the illness of this patient resulted in death. It was believed that this tragic ending could have been avoided had the patient paid closer attention to his diet.

It is distinguished, however, that determining the source of the diseases should not be determined by chance. The author mentions that in the essay *On Ancient Medicine*, doctors are warned to be cautious and to not “confuse what is merely coincidental to the disease with its cause. If a patient has done anything unusual, such as eating strange food, just before he becomes sick, they [mediocre physicians] jump to the conclusion that this must be the cause of the disease.”<sup>9</sup> It was believed that a good doctor always kept in mind that the same symptoms may have had more than one cause. This is why it was so important to adjust the diet of a patient when treating him. If a certain component of the diet was removed and the patient recovered, then it became evident that particular food was the source of the illness. This passage clarifies that diet altering steps were important when diagnosing a patient.

The author of *Early Greek Science* also talks about the correlation between nutrition and growth which is mentioned in *On the nature of the Child*. This essay states, “Each of the constituent substances in the body draws to itself the same substance from the food and drink we consume.”<sup>10</sup> From this statement it can be seen why it was believed that diet played such an important role in health. It becomes evident that if a person did not consume enough of a certain type of food necessary for the body to maintain balance and health, they probably became sick. That is why it was important for doctors to ask ill patients about their diets. However, it was still necessary for doctors to keep in mind that unbalanced diets were not the only cause of disease.

The importance of diet, its function, and its use in medicine is most thoroughly explained and analyzed in Hippocrates' essay, *On Ancient Medicine*. In this essay, diet is first introduced as the reason why medicine was developed. The essay states, "For the art of Medicine would not have been invented at first... if when men are indisposed, the same food and other articles of regimen which they eat and drink when in good health were proper for them."<sup>11</sup> This proves how important diet was to Hippocrates and his followers since they considered that Medicine arose from the necessity of modifying the diet of people that fell ill. This point is further supported when the author says, "... nobody would have sought for medicine at all, provided the same kinds of diet had suited with men in sickness as in good health."<sup>12</sup>

Further evidence that Hippocratic followers believed diet was the origin of Medicine is provided when the author of *On Ancient Medicine* compares a cook and a doctor. He states, "The one sought to abstract those things which the constitution of man cannot digest... the other those things which are beyond the powers of the affection in which any one may happen to be laid up. Now, how does the one differ from the other, except that the latter admits of greater variety, and requires more application, whereas the former was the commencement of the process?"<sup>13</sup> Here, those who developed and mastered the art of cooking are presented as rudimentary doctors. At first people began to modify their diet and cook their food to eliminate the components which man could not digest or tolerate. Physicians are presented as those who had mastered the ability of modifying diet, and had the skill to administer the adequate nutrients in food which would make the patient feel better. They were also able to determine which component of food made the patient ill and adjust the diet to cure the illness the patient was suffering from. The essay says that "upon making any mistake in diet, it will become apparent."<sup>14</sup> This shows that the best way to determine which diet was most appropriate during a certain illness was by trial and error.

Things eaten while in health would be eliminated from the diet, and if the illness was not diminished, a different dietary element would be removed. This process was repeated until the patient's health improved, and so it would be concluded that the particular component of the diet removed was the probable cause of the illness.

This trial and error technique for diagnosing patients is further supported when the author says, "For one must aim at attaining a certain measure, and yet this measure admits neither weight nor calculation of any kind... unless it be the sensation of the body."<sup>15</sup> The only way to properly prescribe a diet was based on the person and their reaction to the foods they ingested and not based on the illness. This is why diagnosing patients with the appropriate disease was so difficult. Even though doctors probably kept records of which diets tended to cause certain types of diseases, this method was unreliable since every patient was so different from others.

It was especially difficult determining the quantity of certain types of food when treating illnesses. Physicians commonly made mistakes when it came to this, but small mistakes were permissible as long as the patient's condition did not worsen significantly. A great physician was one that was able to properly diagnose and treat a very ill patient by correctly calculating the proper amounts of food necessary for the therapeutic diet.

The vitality of food quantity consumption is mentioned in several essays. In the essay *One Ancient Medicine*, it is emphasized that excess food was one cause disease. It is necessary to also note that deficiency of food was considered to be detrimental as well. Malnutrition in this essay is referenced when the author says, "And there are many other ills, different from those of repletion, but no less dreadful, arising from deficiency of food."<sup>16</sup> It is made evident that malnourishment was considered to cause illness just as readily and severely as repletion did. However, the disadvantages of overeating were slightly more severe because, "persons, provided

they take dinner when it is not their wont, immediately become heavy and inactive.”<sup>17</sup> Not only could overeating lead to disease, but is also caused idleness. Overall fluctuations of regimen were thought to further exacerbate disease.

The importance of the quantity of food in a diet is also mentioned in *The Nature of Man*, the author also talks about. The author says, “Diseases due to repletion are cured by evacuation, and those due to evacuation are cured by repletion.”<sup>18</sup> The importance of diet and its correlation to health is again reiterated. It is important to note that when treating a patient by altering their diet, not only was it important to control the items consumed and their quality, but it was equally important to regulate the quantity.

The importance of diet in the medical practices of Hippocrates and his followers is evident in the essays he and his followers wrote. It appears this was the method preferred by many Hippocratic physicians when treating ill patients, since it maintained bodily functions closest to their natural state. When doctors were diagnosing and treating disease, they altered different aspects of diet. These aspects included food type, quality and quantity. Quantity is more commonly mentioned in many of the essays pertaining to the topic, so it seems like this aspect was the most important for patients to adjust when recovering from illness. Both overeating and under eating were thought to be detrimental to health. The practice of regulating diet became a valuable and popular one since it was developed based on observations and it was not simply another theory. Hippocrates contributed to many advances of medicine during ancient Greek times, and the emphasis he gave to diet and its regulation was one of his most significant contributions. This new emphasis on diet based on examination was an important transition in medicine. It was beginning to have a more science based approach focused on observation, instead of philosophical theories that had n concrete basis.

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<sup>1</sup> Edelstein, Ludwig, *Ancient Medicine* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd, G. E. R., *Early Greek Science: Thales to Aristotle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Adams, Francis, trans., *The Genuine Works of Hippocrates: On Ancient Medicine* (London: Francis Bailliere, Tindall and Cox, 1939), 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Jones, W.H.S., trans., *Hippocrates: Nature of Man IX* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979) 27.

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd, G. E. R., *Early Greek Science*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> Adams, Francis, *On Ancient Medicine*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, W. H. S. *Hippocrates: Nature of Man IX*, 26.