Important Contribution to Egyptian Medicine

One of the most important announcements made at the recent annual meeting of the American Historical Association at St. Louis is of special interest to physicians. Professor Breasted of the University of Chicago told of the recent discovery in this country, where it has been for a number of years without its value being recognized, of an Egyptian papyrus on medical science. This proves, indeed, on investigation to be one of the four most important medical documents from Egypt which the modern world has discovered. These four are the Ebers Papyrus of Leipzig, the Berlin Medical Papyrus, the Hearst Medical Papyrus, which is in this country at the University of California, and now the Edwin Smith Medical Papyrus, as it has been decided to call it, which was found among the collection of the New York Historical Society, by Dr. Caroline Ransom Williams, while making a catalogue of their Egyptian department. This papyrus was probably written in the sixteenth century B.C., some 3,500 years ago, and consists of about 500 lines, most of it in excellent preservation....

The preliminary announcement with regard to it, made by Professor Breasted, gives an excellent idea of its contents. It is a discussion of forty-seven different cases. Particularly noteworthy is the care the writer takes to locate exactly the seat of the trouble and the organ which he thinks is affected. He was evidently groping for words that would express exactly his idea, and he did not hesitate to use many words so as to be sure to convey his meaning. Most of the cases discussed in the papyrus are affections or injuries of the head. In one case, the pain is described as located at the root of the nose, exactly between the eyebrows, yet, as it were, within the forehead itself, and is manifestly the first record of a pathologic condition of the frontal sinus ever written. A number of knife wounds of the head are described, some of them penetrating only the scalp, but some perforating the cranial cavity and some of them noted as producing fracture of the skull. Even the worst of these cases are declared not to be necessarily fatal; in fact, a certain number of skulls from this period have been found in which even perforating wounds of the cranium are noted as having been healed.

Our Egyptian colleague of three and a half millenniums ago carefully describes the technic of bandaging wounds of the scalp so as to bring the two lips of the wounds together (these are his own words), and it is evident that he realized all the danger there would be from an open wound of the scalp because of possible burrowing of infectious material....

Added in another hand, at the end of the manuscript, but coming from a date not much later than the preceding portion, is a series of hints as to how the transformation of an old man into a young man may be brought about. They were evidently looking for the elixir of life thirty-five hundred years ago, quite as much as they are in our own time, and probably with as little success.

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A Plea for Accuracy

Inaccuracy of description is a common sin in medical literature. Some articles give the reader the impression that the author has not been informed that there exist standard systems of weights and measures. We are told that a nodule the size of a chestnut was present in the abdominal wall, or that an ulcer the size of a dime was located on the forearm. These descriptions may mean something to the writer who saw the objects, but they carry much less information than they should to the reader. Too many writers seem to forget that medical literature is international, and that their reports, if of any value, will be read in all parts of the world, and possibly for many years. Just what will the Russian scientist know about the size of a dime? How large is a chestnut? Very different sizes will register in the minds of an Italian and a New Engander. The orange is a popular unit of measurement; but what sort: Messina or Florida? They are as one to five or more. Coins fluctuate from generation to generation, vegetable products vary in size, and many are referred to by local names. What are foreigners to understand by references to such standards of measurement as horse beans, cow peas, footballs (Rugby or soccer not specified), baseballs, bird shot (for snipe or turkey?), ping pong balls or grapefruit? How big is a cherry, a potato, a watermelon? Yet these are used as if centimeters or inches had never been defined.... So inaccurate and inconsiderate become the thoughts of men who use such units of measurement that the statements often are even grotesquely vague: we have seen tumors described as the size of a bean, the size of a nut, the size of a bird’s egg, and once, most delightful of all, a patient presented a tumor “as long as a piece of string,” and confidently expect to read about it some day.

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