

MARCH 2023 ASCHP CIRCULAR

When you stand on the banks of the Aegean Sea in Bodrum of Turkey, you can look across the wide blue stretch of turquoise water and clearly see the white stretch of houses on the distant shores of the Island of Kos which makes up part of Greece. Kos is the third largest island of the Dodecanese bay area, after Rhodes and Karpathos; but rather insignificant today. Two thousand years ago it was a completely different story; Kos was well known throughout the ancient world as a famous health centre where many sick people flocked to for treatment. The significant factor was an exceptional Greek physician who revolutionised medical science forever.

Kos was the hometown of Hippocrates of Kos, regarded today as the father of clinical medicine. He lived 400 years BCE and was the first doctor to base his medicine on observation of clinical signs and rational conclusions, instead of prevalent magical or superstitious beliefs of those days. He is perhaps best known by many for his medical ethics that culminated in the formulation of the Oath of Hippocrates, still in use today in many medical schools.

The Hippocratic Oath was based on the Pythagorean duties of justice, secrecy, respect for teachers and solidarity with peers. We owe many clinical and ethical terms and basics of medical practice today to this extraordinary pioneer.

We, Prof Marius and myself, recently had the wonderful privilege to spend a few days in this area. When you look at this insignificantly small island with a handful of people, it is difficult to comprehend how one single person could succeed in gaining so much popularity and stature throughout the world of antiquity, especially in those days when there was no social media or global communication network. Hippocrates is the only historical figure to be associated with Kos throughout the centuries; he must have been an astoundingly remarkable character.

One of the ancient archaeological sites is that of the Askleion of Kos, a famous healing centre erected to the honour of Asclepius, the Greek god of health. It was here that Hippocrates founded his school of medicine and perpetuated the teachings of his direct ancestors, who were priests at the temple of Asclepius. Encounters with many nutritionists, herbalists, sophists and philosophers who came to the temple, in all likelihood enriched his knowledge of medicine and provided him with a broader and more critical education than the usual.

What is the take-away of this historical narrative? I believe it accentuates the difference that one person can make when establishing truth and confirming reality. Hippocrates did not waver to express his convictions: "Let food be your medicine and medicine your food..." he admonished his followers. "I will use those dietary regimens which will benefit my patients according to my greatest ability and judgment, and I will do no harm or injustice to them," he wrote in his oath. His solemn declaration was "I will keep pure and holy both my life and my art."

I wonder, can you also sense his solemnness when you read these words? It is clear, to him, healing was a serious enterprise that required a total commitment and unreserved dedication. It was a noblest of professions and honour to serve people. With such an attitude, Kos was destined to become famous. Where do you and I figure?

May you as counsellor also be blessed with the grandeur of a Hippocrates.

Kind regards,

Dr. Liezl Herholdt