

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Cabinet of Medical Curiosities: Strange Tales and Surprising Facts from the Healing Arts of Greece and Rome.* By J.C. MCKEOWN. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xvi + 268. Hardcover, \$18.95. ISBN 978-0-190-61043-2.

J. C. McKeown, sums up his *A Cabinet of Ancient Medical Curiosities* best with “my chief aspiration is to provide glimpses into the world of medicine in the distant past that offer entertainment rather than enlightenment” (x). Those glimpses, indeed, are entertaining.

This includes a number of gems especially with regard to weight gain & loss (153–54), “white coat syndrome” (48), and even the care of “patients suffering from insanity” (149) have a modern ring.

Allergies anyone? Hippocrates offers a seasonal list (165–166). Herodotus blames the changing seasons (217) while Plutarch describes “new and unfamiliar diseases” (172–173). The big names of the ancient Greek and Roman medical world (e.g. Hippocrates, Galen, Celsus, and Ptolemy) are quoted on a variety of medical topics as would be expected in such a text. The most interesting quotations, however, come from names that normally don’t spring to mind when one thinks of ancient medicine: Cicero, Plato, Josephus, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Mithridates VI of Pontus, Alexander the Great, Vespasian, Commodus, and even that intrepid traveler Pausanias. Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* has an opinion on everything medical. The list of quotable ancient personages is extensive.

McKeown covers medical conditions from the earliest days of magic and religion as with the god Asclepius and his daughter Hygieia. He even includes the 16<sup>th</sup> century Swiss scientist Paracelsus “who preferred to be known as ‘Second to Celsus’ rather than by his actual name, Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim” (259)!

The book’s contents include doctor roles and attitudes, anatomy, sex, prognosis, diagnosis, preventions, treatments, and cures. There is a chapter on “Famous Doctors.” A woman doctor or two is mentioned. One chapter is aptly titled “Particular Ailments and Conditions” just as another is labeled “General Medicine.” There is a chapter called “Women and Children.”

The latter appears more limited in scope than Ralph Jackson's *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire* and its look at women's diseases, birth, and contraception. Here McKeown's Figure 7.4 (101) is identified as an Ostian terracotta relief of a birthing chair (Jackson, 99). Similar chairs are, and have been, used throughout women's history.

Almost all quotations appear in English. Textual Greek or Latin is limited. Each quotation ends with a citation of author (when known), work, chapter, and line. A bibliography, annotated or not, would help locate more obscure, less readily available Latin/Greek source texts. Since McKeown has no footnotes and only provides limited background information, a general "Glossary" (253–263) appears as a separate section. For more detail, one is directed to other sources of which the only provided example is the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

A medically relevant ancient coin image, courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc., introduces each chapter. The photographed coin's description, not its dating or other numismatic information, appears in "Coin Images" (265).

This book contains approximately 70 illustrations, an impressive number for a 268+ page text. While illustration captions are descriptive, location and/or other pertinent additional information on the sculpture, fresco, or artifact is not generally indicated. The "Illustration Credits" section (267–268) appears limited mainly to granted permissions, copyrights, etc. While a few photos are identified by location (i.e. Wellcome Library, London), 19 are credited as "Public domain," an additional 13 are labeled as "Photographed by ..." More comprehensive citations would be helpful to those wishing to view these items in other texts, online, or even *in situ* at a museum or gallery.

My favorite excerpt is the 3 year pregnancy found in marble at Asclepius' temple in Epidaurus (5). Fascinating lists of the evils of menstrual blood (13), the effects of planets on body parts (17), what makes for a healthy child at birth (109), and conditions for which wine should not be used as a treatment (119) are fun to read. Celsus' recommendations on wound closings (143) will appeal to Latin teachers using the *North American Fourth Edition Cambridge Latin Course Unit 2* where a doctor and an astrologer are at loggerheads on the treatment of a wounded Roman living in Alexandria.

Dioscorides tells of animal parts used in cures (189–190, 219, 221–222). Various writers give drug warnings (197–200) as well as herbal remedies (200–205). In these same pages, McKeown writes of doctors at the mercy of pharmacists. Oribasius recommends vision correction methods and others suggest ways

to relieve eye pain (224–225). Epictetus complains of doctors in Rome who advertise (233).

Fans of Harry Potter books will enjoy reading Pliny's description of a basilisk's poisonous powers (152–153). Plutarch, Pliny, Hippocrates, Aulus Gellius, and Dioscorides are among those offering cures of the "sacred disease," better known as epilepsy or seizures (155–159). This reader wonders how many of these cures Julius Caesar's doctor tried on his famous patient.

Lest one think only modern doctors make mistakes, Hippocrates owned up to making a few (195). Quintilian says that Hippocrates mentions these so others might learn from them (195). On the other hand, "perfect" Galen, throughout his long life, never made a mistake (196)!

These are just a few nuggets of ancient medical wisdom included in this delightful book—all to be read in the entertaining light-hearted manner they are offered. In case anyone wishes to attempt an ancient cure, McKeown gives a caveat: "Before trying any of the remedies in this *Medicine Cabinet*, consult your physician. If he or she approves more than a tiny percentage of them, change your physician" (xiv).

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