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History of Medicine

Egyptian medicine books

Egyptian medicine was marked by a mystical approach to healing, as well as a more empirical or rational approach that was based on experience and observation. Common diseases of the eyes and skin were usually treated rationally by the physician because of their accessible location; internal disorders continued to be treated by the spells and incantations of the priest-magician.

The physician emerged around 2600 bc as an early form of scientist, a type distinct from the sorcerer and priest. The earliest physician whose name has survived is Imhotep (lived about 2600 bc), renowned for his studies of pathology and physiology as well as his expertise as a pyramid builder and an astrologer. The Egyptian physician normally spent years of arduous training at temple schools in the arts of interrogation, inspection, and palpation (examining the body by touch). Prescriptions contained some drugs that have continued in use through the centuries. Favorite laxatives were figs, dates, and castor oil. Tannic acid, derived principally from the acacia nut, was valued in the treatment of burns.

Although Egyptians practiced embalming to preserve bodies after death, their knowledge of anatomy was minimal. As a result, they attempted only minor surgical procedures, with the exception of trepanning. According to reports of the Greek historian Herodotus, the ancient Egyptians recognized dentistry as an important surgical specialty.