Unit 1 Ancient Civilisations – Greece

Asclepius (1200BC - 500AD)

In Ancient Egypt and Greece it was often difficult to separate legend from history and fact from fiction. The earliest doctors were often priests, some of whom were later revered as gods. One such figure was Asclepius.

Who was Asclepius?
Asclepius was most probably a physician who practised in Greece around 1200BC. Eventually through myth and legend he became Asclepius, the Greek God of Healing.

How did he become famous?
We know very little about the real person, except that many temples and shrines were dedicated to him. People went to these temples, called Asclepions, to pray that their illnesses would be cured. People also believed that Asclepius’s family had healing powers. In particular his daughter, Hygiea gave her name to the word hygienic, which means clean.

What medical changes did he bring about?
The Asclepion became very important in Greek society. Patients would visit, offering gifts and sacrifices to the God, would stay overnight and be treated by priest healers. The snake, the symbol of Asclepius, would often be used in these healings along with ointments. Medical schools developed, which were usually connected to temples dedicated to Asclepius. His symbol was a serpent wrapped around a staff and this is still used today as a symbol for healing.

How important was Asclepius?
The cult of Asclepius was prevalent right up until the end of the Roman Empire - Asclepius was worshipped as a god not only by the Greeks, but also by the Romans. The priests and temples devoted to him played an important part in establishing the beginnings of the medical profession. He was the first important figure in European medicine.