Hippocrates (c.460-377BC)

Many figures in the Ancient World are a product of fact and mythology. But by about 400BC, as Greek civilisation developed and reading and writing became increasingly important, notable scientists, mathematicians and writers began to be identified. One of these was Hippocrates.

Who was Hippocrates?
Hippocrates was a doctor who worked on the Greek island of Cos. He is regarded as the ‘Father of Medicine’ because his followers wrote over 60 medical books covering a wide range of medical topics including gynaecology, head wounds and diseases. He also founded a medical school on Cos.

What was his contribution to medicine?
Hippocrates developed a new approach to medicine by refusing to use gods to explain illnesses and disease. This meant that medicine came to be seen as a science rather than a religion. Hippocrates stressed the importance of observation, diagnosis and treatment and developed the theory of the body having four humours; black bile, yellow bile, phlegm and blood. Illness occurred, he believed, if one of these humours was out of balance and the body therefore contained too much or too little of it.

How did he change medicine?
Hippocrates stressed the importance of fresh air, a good diet and plenty of exercise to help the body heal itself. All of Hippocrates’s students had to follow a strict ethical code that governed their behaviour as doctors. Students swore that they would maintain patient confidentiality and never deliberately poison a patient. Even today, doctors entering the profession can still choose to swear the Hippocratic oath. This oath was an attempt to place doctors on a higher footing than other healers and set them apart as specialists.

How important was Hippocrates?
Hippocrate’s ideas were a strange mixture of commonsense and factual inaccuracies. His suggestions about diet and exercise are as valid today as they were 2,400 years ago, as was his use of observation. However, his belief in the Four Humours was completely wrong. Strangely enough, this theory lasted until the 17th century, but the importance of exercise and diet was forgotten after the Romans! Hippocrates’s most important contributions were in the development of the medical profession and in a code of conduct for doctors.