Ancient Medicine - Revision

Prehistoric societies

Prehistoric people were hunter-gatherers. They lived in small groups and constantly moved around the country seeking out the best conditions for shelter and food supplies. In order to explain the many things in the world they could not otherwise understand, they believed in spirits.

Prehistoric medicine

Medicine was extremely basic and what treatments there were reflected their close relationship to nature and their superstition about spirits. Though prehistoric people had very little idea of how the body worked treatments included:

- simple cures using medicinal herbs.
- setting broken limbs.
- blaming evil spirits for disease.
- employing 'medicine men' whom they believed wielded power over spirits.
- practising trepanning to release evil spirits.

Ancient Egypt

The ancient Egyptian people did not move around like the prehistoric people. Some areas, such as the Nile valley were fertile and offered greater security for settlements to farm and so survive all year round. People settled in towns and not everybody had to till the soil for survival, some became the first priests and doctors.

Public health problems began to emerge when large numbers of people lived together. Patients were examined and simple surgery was performed. The Egyptians had powerful religious beliefs, with many gods e.g. Thoth, god of healing. Gods still provided the explanation for afflictions such as illness for which there was no obvious cause. They believed in life after death and preserved the bodies of important people by mummification for the afterlife.

Ancient Egyptian medicine

Religious beliefs were becoming more sophisticated and medical knowledge was beginning to be written down and communicated better, however, medical advances were sometimes hindered by religious restrictions. Developments in medicine included:

- A greater knowledge of the human body was reached when preparing corpses for mummification as the process included removing internal organs such as the heart, lungs and liver. However, it was the priests
rather than the doctors who removed the internal organs and although general knowledge of anatomy increased dramatically at this time, religious rules forbade dissection or examination of the organs - they were often simply put into jars and left.

- Discipline in public health. Religious rules required the people to keep their bodies and clothes clean.
- Powerful religious beliefs. All cures, even natural ones, were used alongside prayers and spells. The people often wore charms such as scarab beetle brooches to ward off illness.
- The need for records or documentation. Writing meant that Egyptians were able to write down their treatments. Knowledge could be built up and added to over time and doctors now had to be trained, to learn all past knowledge. Written records were often on papyrus, a kind of paper made from reeds.

**Ancient Greece**

The Ancient Greeks were seafarers and travelled extensively around the Mediterranean. They learnt from other cultures, especially the Egyptians. Greeks were rich enough for some people to have the leisure to think, some were able to devote their lives to science or religion. They believed in many gods but were also interested in explaining the world around them. They made discoveries in science, mathematics and astronomy, looking for natural explanations not just divine ones.

**Ancient Greek medicine**

- Honouring Asklepios, the god of healing, the Greeks built healing centres, called Asklepions, including a temple to the god and places for patients to sleep.
- They believed patients would be cured through visitations by Asklepios and his daughters, Panacea and Hygieia. He would come bearing a snake entwined around his staff.
- They practised clinical observation, followed by diagnosis and treatment, inspired by Hippocrates of Cos.

**Hippocrates**

A hugely influential doctor at this time with many followers. A number of medical books were written around his work. These books emphasised:

- **Natural explanations** - Hippocratic doctors looked for natural causes for diseases rather than blaming gods or spirits. They thought that the proportions of the four humours inside each human being affected a person's health. This theory, though wrong, was important because it was believed for many centuries afterwards. It was a turning point because it said that illness was caused by natural factors inside the patient.
- **Clinical Observation** - Hippocratic doctors observed the whole patient, noting all symptoms. They carefully recorded everything that
happened and wrote it down. Only then would they diagnose the illness, describe what would happen and perhaps treat it. This is still the core of modern methods of medical treatment.

- **Code of Behaviour** - Doctors had to treat their patients with respect, not take advantage of them. To this day, doctors take the "Hippocratic Oath" to behave properly.

**Balance and the four humours**

Greek thinkers emphasised the idea of **balance** in all things including medicine. They believed it was important to lead a balanced lifestyle; to eat in moderation, to take exercise, to sleep regularly and to keep clean. Their belief in the **four humours** were a reflection of this idea of balance. Greek thinkers came up with the theory that the four elements: earth, fire, air and water and the four seasons: summer, autumn, winter and spring were in some way linked to four 'humours' in the human body: yellow bile, black bile, blood and phlegm. They believed that an imbalance in any of these caused illness and doctors could restore the balance by, for example, blood-letting.

**Religion and medicine**

The main point to grasp is the fact that religion was closely linked with medicine throughout this period.

- The healer was usually a holy man and the centres of healing were usually religious places.
- Knowledge tended to be collected in these places and people would go there to be trained.
- This combination of religion and medicine is difficult to separate. Prayers were said, spells were chanted and charms held when a medicine had to be taken or an operation carried out.
- Remember that a lot of medical treatment would be carried out within the family or village without the help of specialist healers. It is difficult to evaluate the connection with religion in these circumstances.
- People in ancient societies wore lucky charms, which suggests a belief in powerful spirits.

**Ancient medicine**

Have a look at this typical exam question about ancient medicine. The question uses sources for you to refer to in your answer. When you have thought about the question have a look at three sample answers below.
Study these three sources. What do they tell us about the role of religion in medicine within the ancient world?

Sam - Picture 1 shows a skull that has had a hole cut into it; this was called trepanning and shows that prehistoric societies believed evil spirits caused illness.

Picture 2 is a scarab beetle that the Ancient Egyptians carried as a lucky charm; this is another link with religion.

In Picture 3 we can see that a picture of someone being cured by the god Asklepios has been carved into a stone which was probably part of a temple. All these sources show there is a connection between religion and medicine.

Richard - Picture 1 shows a trepanned skull and we think prehistoric people carried out this operation because they thought evil spirits were causing bad headaches or another illness and this was a way of getting the spirits outs of the body. It does show a connection with religion since they based the whole treatment on the ideas of evil spirits but at the same time the treatment included practical methods as well.

In picture 2, the lucky charm shows that the Ancient Egyptians believed many illnesses were the result of a curse or evil spirit but it doesn't show other aspects of their medicine, for example a more practical treatment based on ideas taken from the example of the Nile.

Picture 3 shows a god healing somebody but the temples dedicated to Asklepios were almost like health farms where sick people cleansed themselves, ate a healthy diet and exercised as well as praying and sleeping in the abaton. Religion was important in making them think they would be healed but there were also many natural aspects to account for the cures.
All these sources have a clear connection between religion and medicine but religion is really just a part of the cure; surgery, plants and herbs, hygiene etc were all involved as well. It is also important to realise that these sources only show one aspect of medicine at this time and that a range of different treatments could be used.

**Matthew** - All three sources show a connection with religion since the cause and treatment of the disease was based on the idea of spirits and gods. This is why prehistoric people carried out trepanning, why the Egyptians carried charms and why the Greeks prayed to the gods, since they thought they needed the help of spirits and gods to cure people.

Which answer is closest to your own work? Which answer do you think is best?

**Examiner's view** - Richard's answer would gain the most marks. He explains the connection between religion and medicine for each of the sources, he uses the details of the sources to show how ideas about spirits and gods affected treatment for illness, but he also shows that this is only one aspect of medicine. Finally, he links all these comments together to make a general statement, looking at both sides of the question, based on what he has already said.

Matthew's answer would probably get more marks that Sam's. You might find it strange as Matthew's answer is much shorter, however, his answer goes beyond referring to the sources to make an overall comment explaining the link between religion and medicine. Sam's answer isn't a bad answer; it just doesn't go far enough. She describes the sources and says that there was a connection between religion and medicine but doesn't explain what that connection was.

**Glossary**

**Trepanning**
A surgical operation which involves cutting a hole in the skull and removing a piece of bone.

**Asklepion**
Healing centre built by the ancient Greeks where people could sleep.

**Four humours**
Yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm