Unit 1 Ancient Civilisations – Review

Did the understanding of disease advance between the Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds?

Historical evidence can tell us about some of the diseases which afflicted prehistoric society, but little about how illness was perceived or treated in this era. It is thought that prehistoric peoples believed strongly that evil spirits were responsible for causing disease. Because there was no writing system, symptoms of disease were not recorded and it was difficult to pass on knowledge.

Much later, the ancient Egyptians attempted to provide rational (reasoned) explanations for the causes of disease. The development of writing enabled the advanced Egyptian society to accurately record symptoms and cures for illness. They developed considerable expertise in medicine, surgery and anatomy. Even so, the Egyptians maintained strong religious beliefs and still attributed many illnesses to spiritual rather than physical causes.

The development of medicine in ancient Greece followed a similar pattern. Philosopher scientists like Hippocrates and Aristotle began to put forward rational explanations for events, based on observation and diagnosis. Knowledge was shared through the great libraries, such as that at Alexandria. At the same time, advances in medicine were brought about through the cult of Asclepios, the Greek god of healing. Temples devoted to Asclepios became important centres of medicine, where practical treatment was combined with prayer and supernatural belief.

Think about this:

- The specialised Egyptian and Greek civilisations began to seek rational explanations for the causes of disease.
- For the first time, they began to observe and record symptoms of disease.
- The Greek and Egyptian approaches were similar; both societies saw disease as having both natural and supernatural causes.
Egyptian Medicine

The Facts
The Egyptians had a long history of medical treatment developed because of the wealth of Egyptian society. They were the first people to have a specialised medical profession. One of the first doctors was probably Sekhet'eanach, who lived around 3000 BC. He is recorded as having 'healed the king's nostrils'! Another doctor was Imhotep, who lived around 2600 BC. He was vizier, or chief adviser, to King Zozer. When Zozer died, his temple became a place of healing, although archaeologists do not know where it is.

From about 500 BC Imhotep, who was as well as being a doctor, was also a great architect, came to be regarded as a god; magnificent temples were built in his honour at Memphis, thebes and Philae. A number of statues of Imhotep have survived in which he is usually seen reading a scroll. Although we do not have any of his writings, we know about them from other writers who referred to them.

Treatments recommended by Imhotep and other Egyptian doctors include the use of plants and herbs, surgery and magic charms. Many of their ideas have been shown to work, for example, the use of honey in remedies (honey has antibacterial properties and helps to heal wounds). However, they did not completely understand the causes of disease and still believed in gods and spirits when their medical efforts failed.

Memory time...

- Ancient Egypt was a wealthy society with an advanced medical system which utilised practical remedies and supernatural treatments for illness
- Imhotep was an Egyptian doctor, who lived around 2600BC and was later revered as a God
- The Egyptians used treatments which have since been proven to have sound medicinal properties, for example, honey has antibacterial properties and was used to heal wounds.