

Unit 1 Ancient Civilisations

Did the Egyptians advance anatomy and surgery?

The Egyptians were the first people to develop a written knowledge of anatomy and surgery. Other ancient people, such as the Babylonians, also had some knowledge of the body and performed simple operations. However, because the Egyptians had developed a writing system, surgeons could make notes on illnesses and diseases and could make a record of what worked and what didn't. No early Egyptian medical books have survived, but the 'Books of Thoth' is known to have been the most important. Medical practice also advanced because the craft of surgery, like all Egyptian crafts, was passed on from father to son.



The tomb of the Physician, Egypt

Written sources tell us that many operations were done. These ranged from circumcision and the removal of cysts and tumours to the setting of broken bones. There was a good chance of recovering from operations - wounds were treated with willow, which helped stop wounds from getting infected. But no evidence has been found of major surgery.

The Egyptians' religious beliefs meant that some bodies would be mummified, so both surgical and anatomical knowledge was gained. They had a number of bronze instruments and flint knives for performing both mummification and minor surgery. Embalming involved removing the major organs - the brain, liver, stomach, intestines and lungs - to stop them rotting. Thus, Egyptian surgeons knew where the major organs were, but because they believed the body was needed for the afterlife, it could not be completely dissected.

Think about this:

- The effects of the development of writing on medical practice
- The Egyptians used many different surgical instruments (made from metal, usually bronze. These included probes, saws, forceps, scalpels and scissors)
- The role of wealth in enabling elaborate burials that led to improvement in anatomical knowledge.



Uwrapped mummy of Ramses II