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Medical science in Ancient India

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Abstract

Ancient India was a rich nation in terms of knowledge, wisdom and wealth. The medical practice of ancient Indians is many thousand years old. Ayurveda is the most ancient system of Indian medicine. The knowledge of medicine was spread among sages, hermits and medicos who roamed from place to place. Those who practiced solely this art were called Vaidyas who specialized in medicine or surgery. Charak Samhita and Sushruta Samhita formed the eight branches of medicine in the fourth century. These manuscripts are very important and still consulted in India today also. The medical system of Ayurveda came mostly from Charak Samhita. Sushruta was an ancient Indian surgeon who performed cosmetic surgery, he was one who studied human anatomy.

Keywords: Ayurveda, AtharvaVeda, Vaidya, Surgery, Charak Samhita, Sushruta Samhita

Introduction

All ancient civilizations of the world developed their own medical systems, but the ancient Indian system of medicine is considered to be the oldest medical system in the world. An analysis of the material in the Vedas revealed that all the four Vedas had references regarding various aspects of medicine. Apart from Vedas, we get insights into medical practices from Brahmans, Aranyakas and Upanisads. Plants and their products were the main substance used in composition of medicines by the Vedic healers. Other materials included cow's milk and its products, water, soil from various sources and rock salt.

Ayurveda

Vedic period laid the foundation of the Indian medicine system known as Ayurveda. This word is a combination of two words. Ayu, a Sanskrit word means life (from birth to death) and Veda which means knowledge or science. Thus Ayurveda means science of life. The Ayurvedic principles combine the elements of nature; Vayu (air), Jala (water), Aakash (space), Prithvi (earth), and Teja (fire) these are known as Pancha Mahaboota. The fundamental rule of Ayurvedic treatment contains two basic parts. These are to keep the reason for illness and to make the patient more mindful about the reason for sickness. It explains what is appropriate and what is inappropriate in relation to life.

Atharva-Veda

The earliest historical references to healing in India go back to the age of Vedas. Instrophes of Atharva Veda and in the Kausikasutra, belonging to Atharva Veda, we find the beginning of art of healing and of knowledge of healing herbs. Atharva Veda, precursor of Ayurveda contains 114 hymns devoted to medical topics like fever, consumption, wounds, leprosy, heart disease, epilepsy and insanity, eye and ear diseases etc. The treatment of disease (Chikitsa) in Atharva Veda is largely religious and ritualistic emphasizing such practices as the sacred uttrences (Mantra), penances (Niyama), sacred oblations (Mangalahoma), fasting (Upavasa) and purification rites (Prayashchitta). The Atharva Veda also contains material about human anatomy, herbal medicines and classification of disease (as discussed above). Reference is made to 'Wandering medical practitioners' (Charan Vaidya) and those who are trained in medical science (Vaidya).

Origin of Medicine: Mythologically the first exponent of medical science was none other than the creator Brahma himself. Brahma shared this knowledge with Prajapati, who in turn passed on the tradition to Ashwani Kumara and Indra. Surgery (Shaiya) was revealed by Indra to Divodasa, the king of Kasi. he was also an incarnation of the divine Dhanvantri.

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Internal medicine (Kaya Chikitsa) was revealed by Indra primarily to Atreya culminating finally in the classical Charaka tradition of Ayurveda general medicine. So from the above discussion we can draw the following observations;

- Ancient Indian tradition of medicine has its origin from mythical to non mythical.
- Atreya, the physician and Susruta, the surgeon were the first founders of medicine science.

We can trace the history of science and technology in India from Indus Valley Civilization. The excavations at these places show that the people of this civilization follow the principle of sanitation and hygiene. Their houses are open for ventilation of air and sunlight because they know that hygiene prevents diseases. They used various kinds of herbs and drugs to treat the disease and we have archeological sources for this.

Ayurveda is the ancient medical system in India. Ayurveda is considered to be the Upaveda of Atharva Veda. S.N. Dasgupta says, "A Knowledge of the distinction between veins and arteries, just like modern times, was known at that time". Medicine was taught as a separate discipline in ancient times. Medical training was imparted by teachers in their ashrams. The two Universities where all sciences including medical science were taught by renowned teachers were University of Banaras or Kashi and Taxila University.

Vaidya: The Practitioner

The art of healing was no longer confined to Brahmin priests but was entrusted to a class of humans called Vaidyas who specialized in medicine and surgery. The Ayurvedic practitioners were called Vaidya, meaning a person having profound knowledge. They hold the highest ethical standards and are bound by a strict code of conduct. They underwent rigorous training in both medicine and surgery. The Vaidya examined the individual as a whole and not just his disease. Similar to a modern physician, the Vaidya conducted a thorough examination using both direct perception (Pratyaksa) and inference (Anumana). The Vaidya was also expected to question the patient in great detail (Prasna), conduct a thorough physical examination using all his five senses. The Vaidya collected the herbs and other ingredients at auspicious times, spiritualized them with the recitation of mantras and used them to prepare his own drugs.

Renowned Physicians

The medical system of Indians is as old as their civilization. We don't get any information of healing art from prehistoric times. We get information about development of medical science in a continuous way from Vedic period. In Rigveda we get the names of many medicinal plants and herbs and the hygienic properties of water, air and vegetables. Then during Epic period, there was a physician attached to every court whose duty was to take care of about the health of king, some surgeries on the battlefield also took place. King Ashoka, the supporter of Indian Medicine, established many hospitals. The subjects which were taught are: Hygiene, Chemistry, Pathology, Anatomy, Digestion and Circulation. Among the renowned physicians of ancient India was Charaka at the court of Kaniska. Others include Sushruta who composed Sushruta Samhita, Nagarjuna who revised and enlarged it, Vagbhata who wrote the

Ashtangahrudayam. Another renowned physician was Jivaka. The description of the full-fledged medical system first appears in the two medical treatises-The Charak Samhita and The Sushruta Samhita, which are till now important texts for the students of Ayurveda. We are going to study them in detail.

The Medical System of Ancient India as Mentioned in two Samhitas

Sushruta Samhita- The approach of Sushruta Samhita is similar to Charaka Samhita but with special emphasis on surgery. He is considered as 'the Father of Surgery'. He documented many diseases, cataloged the use of various medical herbs and wrote directives for performing surgical procedures including rhinoplasty and skin grafts. Sushruta described 30 surgical procedures and about 120 surgical instruments. He also classified surgeries into eight categories. The Sushruta Samhita consists of six sections. Sushruta uses interesting similes to explain the function of the body. Digestion is seen as the central process of bodily function. The Sushruta Samhita describes it as the most useful branch of medical knowledge

Anatomy: Sushruta believed that knowledge of practiced anatomy is essential to being a practitioner. He has described the full procedure in his Samhita. He told us how to use dead body for the study of anatomy, for this purpose a perfectly preserved body should be used which would not be very old and person did not die to severe disease. The body would be placed in still water in a moving stream for seven days after properly washed. After seven days each layer would be examined starting from skin. Sushruta tells 300 bones (Charak gives 306 bones), 500 muscles, 107 articulations, 210 joints, 900 ligaments. According to him all the blood vessels proceed through naval.

Ophthalmic surgery: Susruta specialized in ophthalmic surgery, a special operation performed for removing cataracts. The tool used to perform the surgery was Jabamukhi Salaka. It was used to loosen the lens and push the cataract out of the field of vision, then the eye was soaked with warm butter and bandaged,

Rhinoplasty: Rhinoplasty or nose job was also performed at that time. Sushruta in his Samhita mentioned the surgical procedure for rhinoplasty. The surgery was performed for two reasons: Firstly, to improve breathing function of nose and secondly, to improve the cosmetic look of the nose. Susruta Samhita provides the first written record of a forehead flap Rhinoplasty. He used a flap of skin from the forehead, called a pedicle, to form a new nose. Sushruta also gave a detailed account of treatment of 12 varieties of fractures and six types of dislocation. He also mentioned procedures to induce growth of lost hair and removal of unwanted hair. He was one of the first Physicians in history to suggest that a student of surgery should learn about the human body by dissecting a dead body. Sushruta pioneered many operations and recorded them in his Samhita, paving the way to modern medicine and science in India.

Charka Samhita: This is a Sanskrit work of great antiquity. Charak believes that if a physician fails to enter the body of a patient with the lamp of knowledge and understanding

then he can never treat diseases. Physicians, first of all, should understand all the environmental factors which affect the patient's disease. Only then he should move for treatment. According to him, prevention of disease is more important than cure. Charak was the first physician to introduce digestion, metabolism, immunity and blood circulation. Charak in his treatise Charak Samhita described the medicinal qualities and functions of 100000 herbal plants. He also described that our diet and physical activities influence our mind. The medical system of Ayurveda mostly came from the theories developed in Charak Samhita. The main aim of Ayurveda is of removing the illness and not just to cure the disease. The herbs which were used in Ayurveda remedies do not affect the body's metabolism and they have minimal side effects. The Charaka Samhita presents itself as containing knowledge received by Agnivesha, a sage named Atreya. It is divided into 120 chapters and in 8 sections. It defined Ayurveda as the science of the causes and symptoms of disease, of their treatment and of the maintenance of health. It also deals with the origin of medical science, the fundamental causes of conception and birth and physical deformities. This treatise contains a detailed classification and nomenclature of diseases and their definition. According to Charaka, Ayurveda has eight branches.

Conclusion

Numerous other texts of medicine, other than Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita were regularly composed through the centuries such as the Bhela Samhita, Kashyapa Samhita and Agnivesha Tantra. Other notable contributions were Astanga Haridya of Vagbhata and Madhava Nidana. So from the above discussion, we may conclude that medical science of ancient India was at an esteemed high position and if we can rediscover this ancient science the entire humanity will be greatly relieved from many diseases which are caused by modern time's daily routine and we may have a healthy world.

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