GREEK MEDICINE – THE THEORY OF THE FOUR HUMOURS

Medicine Through Time
ANCIENT GREECE

They had natural beliefs too!

- At the same time as Greeks were staying in Asclepiions, other Greeks were developing new theories about disease and treatment
- Their new ideas suggested that gods had nothing at all to do with health or disease
- They began to believe that diseases have natural causes
- One natural theory they came up with was the Theory of the Four Humours, this was developed by Aristotle

KEY POINT!

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The Theory of the Four Humours
humours = liquids.

They believed that the body contained four important liquids which they called humours. They were:

- phlegm
- blood
- yellow bile
- black bile

If these humours stayed in balance then a person would remain healthy
If they became unbalanced this could make a person ill

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How was the theory developed?

The Elements

The theory of the four humours was derived from the theory of the four elements.

- They believed that everything in the world was made up from four elements - air, water, earth and fire.

The Seasons

The seasons were also linked with the four elements. They knew each season was different and they could see how the elements could explain this.

For example, water was cold and moist so was winter. Therefore in winter, water must be the dominant element.

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How the theory of the four humours links together!

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Treatments from the theory of the four humours

- After establishing how the patient’s humours were unbalanced, the job of a Greek doctor was to try to re-balance the body’s humours

**Bloodletting** - surgical removal of a patient’s blood

**Vomiting** - to give a patient something to make them sick

**Purging** - remove impurities through faeces

- They also knew there was no cure for some illnesses and might just recommend a visit to an Asclepius!

You are a Greek doctor! Suggest some treatments!

1. On a rainy spring day your patient keeps throwing up and has a temperature
   - **Bleeding** operation to remove excess blood

2. On a cold winter’s day your patient’s nose won’t stop running and they keep sneezing
   - Give them a Spicy food to eat.

3. On a summer’s day your patient has a temperature and is sweating
   - **Purge** the patient, giving them a diuretic

Do you know your stuff?

1. What were the four humours of the body?
   - Blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile

2. When did someone become unwell?
   - When their humours became unbalanced

3. What three treatments could be used to make someone better?
   - **Purging, Vomiting, Bloodletting**

4. Who developed the Theory of the Four Humours?
   - Aristotle!