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Beyond Ancient Societies

Medical Practices that Draw Parallels

Written by James Lee
Illustrated by Leah Potoff

Whenever I catch a cold, my mom makes me chicken broth soup engulfed in ginseng juice with rice. This dish contains many different herbs to help cope with colds. All these ingredients combined make me better. If one is missing, I feel like I do not get the healing effect I normally feel. Most of the time, the lunch meal my mom prepares for me has a better result than the aspirin doctors prescribe to relieve my cold.

As my mom scolds me for not taking care of my body enough or never taking my vitamins regularly, there is a story that she tells me as I am struggling to pick my spoon up to feed myself. The story goes, "Since the times when tigers used to smoke," a Korean metaphorical way of describing ancient times, "the old lady that mysteriously cured cold sells a mysterious soup that when eaten, the sickness goes away." The same soup in the story is the soup that my mom prepares for me when I am sick. This made me question three things: What was ancient medicine like? How do its practices persist in today's society? What do the ancient civilizations tell us about today's society?

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Medicine practices started as early as ancient Egypt. The well-prescribed history of these civilizations gives us a glimpse of what their medical practices were like. Ancient Egypt had a hierarchy of medical professionals starting from ordinary doctors (swnw) at the lowest level, overseer of doctors (imyr swnw), chief of doctors (smsw swnw), and the eldest of doctors (smsw swnw). Even particular jobs called the 'shd swnw' inspected these doctors. The treatments that these doctors gave to their patients ranged widely from heart disease, dentistry, cancer, and even circumcision. Specifically, it is written in scripture that Egyptians used fumigation to burn off the area with similar descriptions to cancer. This is similar to the High-Intensity Focused Ultrasound (HIFU) method of treating tumors, where they concentrate high heat on specific areas of the body with the tumor. Although the only known major operation was circumcision, the drawing that pointed to the circumcision operation had evidence of the use of specialized tools like scissors and scallops.

Advanced medicine practices could also be seen in the nearby civilization of Mesopotamia. Ancient Mesopotamia civilizations have records that tell historians how advanced their medical procedures were. Unlike Egypt, their 'healers' were divided into three categories: healers who made diagnoses (baru), healers who expelled demons and incantations (ashipu), and healers who treated the sick with drugs and operations (asu). The Mesopotamian societies had a strong development for herbal medicine, as surgery was not recommended. However, there is definite evidence that they used hemp and opium as a treatment for patients, a source of medicine we widely used today. Interestingly, hemp was also used to treat menstruation cycles in ancient Mesopotamia. Not only did they use what was described as "menstruating bandages," which

were strips of cloth, but these bandages were equipped with painkillers like hemp to control mood swings.

A similarity between these two civilizations is that scriptural evidence indicates women healers during their dominance. Scriptures that record ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia all indicate that to qualify as a healer; one has to be highly educated and among the elite. Contrary to traditional and more modern civilizations where only men were allowed to pursue higher education, women in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia were allowed these rights. Healers often only cared for people of higher social status since these societies were class-based. Although a male doctor would not answer to a female doctor, the female doctor would perform spells and surgery as she walked down the streets of civilization. They were just as important as male doctors to keep society healthy.

Moreover, it was often the wife's job to take care of the kids and provide for them, making them essential in the society of Egypt and Mesopotamia. These methods were passed on verbally, often from mother to mother, proving that women in Egyptian society and ancient Mesopotamia's tightly-knit society prioritized childcare. The structure of its community still exists today, some five-thousand years later. Even now, many care methods for sick children are not research-backed but passed down from generation to generation.

However, as both the ancient Egyptian civilization and the Mesopotamian civilization collapsed, the role of women as the bondage of the family also collapsed. After researching, I realized that even though the culture we live in today seems significantly more advanced than ancient Egypt or Mesopotamia, their societies were not that different from ours. It may be very likely that a kid back then had a similar story to mine to tell the world. Meanwhile, today's society is plagued with diseases of racism, sexism, and polarization that separate us from one another. It begs the question: what is the purpose of these advancements if the same "diseases" plague our society today as they did five

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thousand years ago? Scholars have only been able to decipher about one to two percent of Egypt and Mesopotamia's scriptures. Despite that, we could still find similarities that were scarily close. We as a civilization have distanced ourselves from other individuals and cultures even though the cultures that we live in have not gone extinct. We must strive to heal these diseases and conserve our cultures.

If not, the herbs and soup story my mom told me when I was sick may not continue to the next generations. Although I will never know if my mom's story was true, I am satisfied to learn that the traditions of moms caring for their sick children will be a culture we will not lose throughout future generations. ● ● ●

