

“Western” Medicine is Misleading: It’s Time to Give Credit Where It’s Deserved

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I remember sitting through the first few weeks of medical school learning about the history of the Hippocratic Oath, and the vast impact of the ancient Greeks on the medicine we practice today. While the Greeks truly contributed significantly to medicine, I have always been intrigued by how most of the history we learn is Eurocentric. In contrast, I was raised by Iraqi parents who loved pointing out the contributions of my Mesopotamian and Arab ancestors to the world, including those in medicine, but I seldom hear any mention of any of that through my education. Similarly, I find that to be the case for medical contributions by additional prominent regions of the “East,” including India, China, Persia, and several others.

The problem with Eurocentric history is that it conveys the idea that we have the Western world and its ideals to thank for what we have and how we practice medicine today. Cleveland Clinic’s article on “Western Medicine” defines the term as having its roots in the Western world, with other names being “conventional” or “mainstream” medicine, while reducing “Eastern” medicine to traditional Chinese medicine (1). “Western” medicine is often used synonymously with “modern” medicine, virtually erasing the long history of Eastern contributions to the medical field. However, the contributions of Eastern civilizations to modern medicine dates back millenia. In fact, the ancient Greeks gained much of what they learned about medicine from traveling to the “Near East,” including the Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations (2). Let’s take a closer look at medical advances that came from the East.

Egypt is home to the very first documented physician in the world, Imhotep, whose name means “the bringer of peace” (3). Having served under King Djoser in the 27th century BCE, he is credited as being the primary author of the Ebers Papyrus, one of the oldest known records of medicine in Egypt, and he is well-renowned for his practices in the healing of both the mind and body.

Meanwhile, in ancient India, Sushruta was a prominent medical figure who became known as the “Father of Surgery” (4). He pioneered several procedures performed today from cataract surgery to cesarean sections, and even rhinoplasty—despite that plastic surgery procedures are often thought of as more recent medical developments. His

documentation of these procedures contributed immensely to surgical practice today.

The influence of the East on medicine was only bolstered by the Islamic Golden Age, as the Silk Road facilitated the transfer of ideas between the East and the West. During this era, the Arab surgeon Abu al-Qasim al-Zahrawi became known as the “Father of Operative Surgery” for his medical textbook *Kitab Al-Tasrif*, which documented the first medical descriptions of hemophilia and ectopic pregnancy and was studied by Europeans for the next 500 years (5). Similarly, Ibn Al Nafis was another Arab physician who discovered how pulmonary circulation works, a discovery usually attributed to William Harvey, even though Ibn Al Nafis described it 300 years beforehand (6). Additionally, Ibn Sina was a Persian physician who documented the anatomy of the eye and several ophthalmic diseases, diabetes, and illustrated psychiatric conditions among others in his work entitled *The Canon of Medicine*; he is now known as the “Father of Early Modern Medicine” (7). Several advances were made possible because scholars during this era translated work from Greek, Syriac, Pahlavi, and Sanskrit into Arabic, making the knowledge to support new discoveries more accessible (8).

Even in modern times, we see the impact of Eastern medicine on our practices today. Chinese “traditional” medicine is often erroneously connoted as backwards or outdated; however, traditional medicine has played a major role in the discovery of widely used modern medical treatments. In 2015, Tu Youyou won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for discovering the antimalarial drug artemisinin, which has saved millions of lives (9). The artemisinin was isolated from the sweet wormwood plant, which has been documented for the treatment of periodic fevers—a symptom of malaria—since 317-420 AD (10). Similarly, arsenic trioxide was used in Chinese medicine for over 5000 years, and in 1997, it became used worldwide for the treatment of acute promyelocytic leukemia (11). It is also worth mentioning that the earliest practice of smallpox variolation originates from China and India, and this practice was later brought to Europe after Lady Mary Wortley Montagu observed variolation in the Ottoman Empire (12).

Outside of China, other Eastern regions have also impact-

ed modern medicine in recent history. The Indian physician Upendranath Brahmachari was nominated for the Nobel Prize twice (1929 and 1942) for his discovery of urea stibamine, the treatment for visceral leishmaniasis (13). From Japan, several discoveries have been made within the past 50 years that earned Nobel Prizes, such as the development of ivermectin by Satoshi Omura and a novel breakthrough in cancer immunotherapy by Tasuku Honjo (14,15).

Undeniably, ample evidence supports the contributions of Eastern civilizations to modern medicine, and the examples presented in this article are far from exhaustive. Truthfully, each civilization warrants its own focused study on its medical discoveries. Labeling modern medicine as “Western” omits extensive history that ultimately upholds colonial beliefs, perpetuating ideas of Eastern civilizations as archaic and dependent on the West for modern innovations, which could not be further from the truth. I hope that this piece allows others to understand that Eastern cultures have always contributed to modern, conventional medicine, and the East will only continue to be an everlasting contributor to modern medicine; no erasure of Eastern history from our discussions is going to change that.

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