How much did the ancient Greeks influence Roman medicine?

Teaching notes

This lesson is designed to come after those on ancient Greece but does not require any prior knowledge of ancient Rome. This is a card sorting exercise.

1. Give out a set of cards to each pair of students and ask them to arrange them into chronological order. Each card has a date on except G and I, but students should be able to work out where these cards go from reading them (i.e. they’re both about Galen and go with card J).

2. Once the students have the cards in a line, ask them to identify those cards which suggest that the Greeks had an influence on Roman medicine and move them up, though keeping them in the same position in the chronological line.

3. They should then use the information on the cards to answer the following questions:

   a) What evidence is there that the Romans borrowed supernatural ideas from the Greeks?

   b) What did the Romans think of Greek doctors and ideas before 100 AD. Give examples from the sources.

   c) Who was the most important person in terms of introducing Greek ideas, such as the Theory of the Four Humours, to Rome? When did he do this? Why was he able to influence lots of Roman doctors?

   d) What evidence is there of the Romans using the Theory of the Four Humours?

   e) In what ways did the Romans think of themselves as different from, and better than, the Greeks?
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Source A

The urine of a person who has been living on a cabbage diet should be kept as medicine. When warmed up, this urine is a good remedy for diseases of the muscles. If you wash little children with this urine, they will never be weak and puny.

An early idea for a type of medicine from around 400BC. Early Romans believed that cabbage had health-giving properties.

Source B

As a result of the increase in the number of works, reservoirs, fountains and water basins … the air is purer … With such an array of indispensable structures carrying so many waters, compare, if you will, the idle pyramids or the useless, though famous, works of the Greeks.

The Roman writer, Frontinus in AD97. Frontinus was commenting that Roman aqueducts and reservoirs were much more useful than Greek ideas on medicine.

Source C

In 295 BC the people of Rome were in grave danger – from plague … In desperation, the Romans turned to an outsider – they built a temple, dedicated to Asclepius, the Greek god of healing.

From Medicine and Health Through Time, Dawson and Coulson, SHP.

Source D

Drawing of the symbol of Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, which shows his snake winding around surgical instruments. This symbol was found in many Roman temples, such as the Roman altar found at Chester from the end of the second century AD.

Source E

There is no doubt that all these Greek doctors hunt for popularity by using their so-called ‘natural approaches’. They do not hesitate to buy this popularity with our lives. Better that we rely on the remedies and prayers taught within our own families.

From a book written by the Roman writer Pliny in 79 AD.

Source F

When a patient has the fever in spring, draw off blood from his veins, then apply clothes which have been soaked in cold water to his forehead.

From a Roman medical text of the early third century AD.
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**Source G**

Galen was greatly influenced by Hippocratic ideas … he accepted the idea of the Four Humours. Like the Hippocratic doctors he carried out careful clinical observations.

*From Medicine and Public Health Through Time, AcAleavy, Patterson, Whittock, Hodder Murray.*

**Source H**

The Greek doctors have sworn to kill all barbarians with their drugs, and they call us barbarians. Remember that I forbid you to use doctors.

Roman author Cato, who died in 149 BC, warning his son against using Greek doctors.

**Source I**

The Romans were not as interested as the Greeks in developing theories about the causes of disease. Galen suggested that ‘seeds of disease’ floated in the air. However, he knew that this idea did not help cure illnesses so he spent little time on it, preferring to collect more practical knowledge.

*From Medicine and Health Through Time, Dawson and Coulson, SHP.*

**Source J**

Galen was born in about 130AD in a place called Pergamon, which today is in Turkey. Pergamon was a Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire … Galen studied medicine in the leading medical schools of Alexandria … In 161AD Galen took a brave decision; he decided to move to Rome. In the 30 years that followed until his death in 201AD Galen was doctor to the ruling family, and the single most successful doctor in the empire. Galen was greatly influenced by Hippocratic ideas … he accepted the idea of the Four Humours.

*From Medicine and Public Health Through Time, AcAleavy, Patterson, Whittock, Hodder Murray.*