

BLACKS AND MEDICINE

THE EGYPTIAN CONNECTION (PART I)

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Foreword.

In the last issue of this Newsletter, in my article about [Anarcha](#), I mentioned I would write about the role that Blacks have played in medicine. Initially, I intended to concentrate on their contribution to the New World. However, as I started doing the research, it occurred to me the topic is vast, and to do it justice, I would have to include the Egyptian experience. Hence, this will be a serial presentation.

In the mid-seventies, when I was a student at the then Downstate Medical School, in Brooklyn, NY, a student in California, Bakke, brought a lawsuit against the practice of Affirmative Action, of which I am a proud product. We had to suffer from innuendos or flat-out exclamations by students and some faculty members that folks who resembled me lacked the intellectual capacity for higher learning, especially in a discipline like medicine. This canard continues to be repeated despite all evidence to the contrary. With the recent Supreme Court decision banning the positive inclusion of race in the admissions process, some corners feel vindicated, and there is always the underlying suspicion and the constant questioning of one's credentials and IQ. The all-out vitriol against wokeism, a movement that attempts to right historical wrongs, bodes trouble for the days ahead. Then again, what else is new? If our ancestors survived the Middle Passage and centuries of slavery, then this too shall pass. We must never be discouraged in our search for the truth as it always liberates one.

So, the question we need to answer is the following: Did black folks play any role in the development of medicine? Does, by any chance, any evidence exist that far from being minor players in a discipline of the smart and talented, that black folks played a major role? This can seem like a tall order to the meek, or a worthy challenge to the uppity. Either way, once one finds the answer, it ought to fan some fresh air. Applying due diligence by perusing history, the answer to both questions remains the same, like **YES, YES**, with the regularity of a pendulum, the persistence of a broken record, and the infallible reality of day following night.

A good entry point for anyone interested in this topic is a comprehensive review of the matter in the [JNMA under the pen of Newsome, published in 1979](#). Calling it a trove of nuggets is an understatement. It's as pertinent today as it was then. It opens the door to many other documents that the curious can scrutinize. Additional references by [Hirst](#) and [Hurry](#) do provide quite a bit of supporting data.

A note of caution, however. The notion of black as an ethnic classification is fraught with historical traps. One needs to consider others' sensibility. In countries bathed by the Mediterranean Sea, the notion of a positive image of dark skin folks is often alien, and this has been so since times immemorial. Two examples can illustrate this well. Of recent memory, is the local uproar to the biopic of Anwar el-Sadat. The choice of a charcoal-skinned African American thespian, Lou Gossett, Jr., rankled many. [The Egyptian government banned the movie](#). The lesson here is simply that some non-whites take exception to their inclusion among Blacks. This is a fact, and there is not much we can do about it. Suffice it to say that the color line is ignored or brought to the fore as a matter of convenience by the beholder. In a very distant past, an iconic figure, Aristotle, Plato's

disciple who himself trained in Egypt, we learn by reading Newsome that, “Aristotle remarks that the Egyptians and Ethiopians were cowards because of their ‘excessively black color.’”

This is a strong statement, and some may question its accuracy. Newsome gives the reference that can be [accessed digitally](#). One can also find another one at this [website](#). Yet ancient Egypt used to be called *Kmt* or *Kemet*, meaning the “land of black folks.” Moving forward, this is not nuclear physics. Any exhibit about Egyptian culture clearly shows that there are plenty of Nubian features present.

Most learned individuals would cite Hippocrates if asked about the father of Western medicine. Imhotep would be mentioned among woke folks, even then, not in the plurality. This should not be surprising since any conclusion must be prefaced with the proviso “based on the available evidence” or “the accepted standard.” That depends on the extent of the research involved to develop the available evidence. To choose Hippocrates means one is eliding the Egyptian millennia of culture. Make that advanced culture. Such thorough documentation can be found by reading the works of great historians such as Manetho, who lived in 300 BC. His magnum opus, [Aegyptiaca](#), written in Greek, offers a great window into ancient Egypt. Let’s look at the historical facts and decide if the “available evidence” leads to the “accepted standard.”

Considering the plethora of available written scientific material confirming the supremacy of Egyptian culture, it’s amazing that one needs to argue that Imhotep and not Hippocrates warrants the title of the foremost physician from the past. The validity of the notion of Imhotep’s membership among the canons of medicine rests on some impressive pedigree. No less than the premier clinician of the 20th century, Sir William Osler, in his famous book, [The Evolution of Medicine](#), gave his vote of confidence.

According to Newsome, Manetho mentioned the existence of an Egyptian pharaoh, *Athothis*, around 3200 BC, who practiced medicine and wrote many books, albeit nonexistent. Hence, without any documentation of his writing, Imhotep gets the pass. On the other hand, a modern historian, an Egyptian endocrinologist, according to Newsome, [Paul Ghalioungui](#), who specialized in ancient Egyptian medicine, gave the baton not to Imhotep, who lived around 2980 BC, but rather to Hesy-Re (or Ra), who lived almost four centuries later, history’s first [dentist](#). By failing to score a corker, his arguments have not caught traction.

Imhotep’s life is chronicled in a book by Charles Rivers Editors, named *Imhotep The Life and Legacy of the High Priest who designed ancient Egypt’s first major pyramid*. His name stands for “The one who comes in peace.” He was a high priest (*kheri-heb hertep*), an architect, a doctor, and an author. He became famous by building the first Step Pyramid in Saqqara, close to Memphis, as the vizier of King Djoser/Zoser/Nejerikhet. This was considered a cultural game-changer. The introduction of the technique of rough-hewn stone in construction over muck brick attained the status of a technological tour de force. At this point, it’s more of intellectual curiosity or historical footnote that Athothis or Hesy-Re vie for the position.

His father was an architect, and Imhotep studied religion, architecture, and medicine. “Imhotep, aka *Imouthes/Imuthes/Imuthês* in Greek, in an acculturation process, was conflated with *Aesclepios*, the Greek god for healing. Newsome cites the 19th-century British historian Gerald Massey, who wrote *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World*. [Diop](#) wrote eloquently about the nexus of civilization and black culture. It’s worth reading.

We are lucky that the Egyptians left us a paper trail of their knowledge on papyrus. Several texts are available, but the Edwin Smith and Ebers papyri are the two most famous translated collections. The [Edwin Smith](#) papyrus can be found among the rare books collection of the Academy of Medicine of NY. The [Ebers papyrus](#) is kept at the University of Leipzig. They are

separated by a millennium, 2600 BC vs. 1500 BC, respectively. They retain the name of the person who released them for translation, an interesting story in of itself. In 1862, an American antiques dealer, Edwin Smith, purchased a well-preserved papyrus. An American Egyptologist, James Henry Breasted, translated it into English after Smith died in 1909. Another antique dealer, Georg Ebers, bought a papyrus in 1873 and donated it to the University of Leipzig.

They represent medical textbooks and describe several cases and treatments offered. No one is doubting the authenticity of either. The authorship is not so clear-cut. On a historical note, as a sign of validation in 2005, the Academy of Medicine of NY collaborated with the bluest emporium of Western civilization, the [Metropolitan Museum in NY](#), to showcase its Edwin Smith papyrus. Not to be outdone, the entire Ebers papyrus is on permanent display at the University of Leipzig library and is considered the [largest papyrus scroll in the world](#). The site is interesting and worthwhile visiting. The text below greets the visitor in German and English.

Der Papyrus Ebers wurde im Original schon 1873 aus konservatorischen Gründen zerschnitten und seitdem unter Glas aufbewahrt. Mit der 2020 hergestellten Replik des Papyrus Ebers wird erstmals der Eindruck des Originals in seiner ganzen Länge und Schönheit wieder vermittelt. • *In 1873, the original Ebers Papyrus was cut up into many small sections to simplify its conservation. It has been kept under glass ever since. The original scale and beauty of the Ebers Papyrus are recreated for the first time by the full-size replica produced in 2020.*

Der Papyrus Ebers ist die längste und einzig vollständig überlieferte Schriftrolle der altägyptischen Heilkunde. Sie ist 18,63 Meter lang und mit schwarzer und roter Tinte auf 108 Textkolumnen beschrieben. Ihre Entstehung am Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. wird sowohl durch den Kalender auf der Rückseite wie durch eine 2015 durchgeführte Radiokarbondatierung bestätigt. • *The Ebers Papyrus is the longest scroll devoted to ancient Egyptian medicine, and the only one to have been completely preserved. It is 18.63 metres long and comprises 108 columns of text written in black and red ink. Its origin at the end of the 16th century BC is indicated by the calendar on the reverse and was confirmed by radiocarbon dating in 2015.*

The entire papyrus scroll can be visualized for the intellectually curious by accessing this [website](#). The issue of authorship reflects the peculiar norms of the society then. According to Egyptologists, the accepted practice was that an author didn't sign his name to his manuscript, but one knew who the author was. This may seem counterintuitive, but we must remember that different eras practiced different customs. Incest nowadays is frowned upon, but it was widespread among the royal families in ancient Egypt. King Tut's wife, [Ankhesenamun](#), was his half-sister (same father) and his cousin (his mom was his aunt). After his death at age 18 or 19, his wife married either her father, Akhenaten, or her mother's dad, Ay (reports vary on this). However, and for reasons we will delve into, Imhotep is accepted as the author of the Edwin Smith papyrus.

As we stated earlier, as the pharaoh's vizier, his job entailed supervision of the construction of the Step Pyramid. As such, he would see a lot of trauma cases of workers having on-the-job accidents. The Edwin Smith papyrus is replete with trauma cases. The papyrus's first translator thought Imhotep was the most likely author. Some people think he may have authored the Ebers papyrus, but it's open for debate, according to Egyptologists.

This tells us that ancient Egypt and, yes, its multi-hued population did develop the most advanced type of medicine for the time and was the source of training for the Greeks. Its tenet at the time relied on balance between Opposite Forces to maintain good health. The Greeks would adopt it. Newsome made us aware that medicine had become sophisticated to the point that physicians were classified according to specialties, similar to what we have today.

In the case of Hippocrates, Newsome makes the case that [Hippocrates](#) gets a lot of credit for others' work, namely Imhotep and Pythagoras. The latter was born around 570 BC, and like so many Greek philosophers, he studied in Egypt and followed their precepts. In those days, a physician often was also a philosopher and could hold other titles. Pythagoras is more famous as a mathematician, but he was also a physician, and his teachings belonged to the school of thought of the Egyptians. The so-called Hippocrates Oath includes many of the principles found in Pythagoras's teachings that he acquired while studying in Egypt on the advice of Thales, who also trained in Egypt. A most worthy academic reference cited by Newsome is a thesis by [Pierre Galimard](#), written in 1940, where he presents the strong influence of Pythagoras on Hippocrates in granular detail. It's written in French, but it is an excellent exegesis. The paragraph below summarizes the content.

Mais si cette influence a été de tout temps reconnue et admise comme une évidence, on en a parfois singulièrement restreint l'importance en voulant seulement la voir à l'origine de la théorie des périodes cycliques et des jours critiques. Avec l'aide de travaux récents qui ont mis en lumière certains aspects de la doctrine pythagoricienne, nous avons voulu montrer qu'en réalité, toute l'œuvre hippocratique est comme baignée de Pythagorisme, que dans tous ses écrits le médecin de Cos rend un muet hommage à Celui qu'on ne nommait pas et que c'est en restant constamment fidèle à la pensée du Maître qu'il applique son enseignement à la médecine.

However, while this influence has consistently been recognized and accepted as self-evident, its importance has sometimes been severely limited by a desire to see it as the sole source of the theory of cyclical periods and critical days. With the help of recent works that have shed light on certain aspects of Pythagorean doctrine, we have sought to show that, in reality, the entire Hippocratic works are bathed in Pythagoreanism, that in all his writings, the physician from Cos pays silent homage to the Unnamed One, and that it is by remaining constantly faithful to the Master's thought that he applies his teaching to medicine.

The available evidence points toward Imhotep as the first documented eminent physician. Hippocrates piggybacked on the shoulders of both Imhotep and Pythagoras. This is no shameful practice because we move ahead by hitching our aspirations to the path of and hoisting our achievements on our elders' shoulders. We just need to give credit where it's due. So long as the issue of race is not raised, few academicians will argue against the rightful prominent role of Imhotep. Elevating Imhotep is not a rejection of Hippocrates either; it's simply a historical correction in the grand tradition of wokeism that seeks the truth to enlighten us all and make us better human beings without any ulterior motive of retribution or hatred.