

مجلة كلية الآداب بقنا (دورية أكاديمية علمية محكمة)

Women Healthcare in Ancient Egypt

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Introduction:

The term Healthcare is defined as:

The services rendered by members of the health professions for the benefit of a patient.¹

Health care (or healthcare) is the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease, illness, injury, and other physical and mental impairments in humans. Health care is delivered by practitioners in, medicine, chiropractic, dentistry, nursing, pharmacy, allied health, and other care providers. It refers to the work done in providing primary care, secondary care and tertiary care, as well as in public health.²

Healthcare the prevention, treatment, and management of illness and the preservation of mental and physical well-being through the services offered by the medical and allied health professions.³

Healthcare the maintaining and restoration of health by the treatment and prevention of disease especially by trained and licensed professionals (as in medicine, dentistry, clinical psychology, and public health).⁴

The field of healthcare seeks to promote an understanding of the biological and psychosocial factor affecting women's health, and to integrate this understanding into public health initiatives, including training of health care providers. Recognition by the medical research establishment of the need to study health and disease in women as well as men has been essential to this new paradigm. Despite the strong influence of biological factors, psychosocial issues still remain the single most important determinant of health status for many women.⁵

Public Health:

Herodotus in Vth century B.C. expressed his admiration of the health of the Egyptian, saying that they were the healthiest in the world after the Libyans. Herodotus was a shrewd observer: his statements may at times sound questionable but, when based on first hand observation, they have always been confirmed whenever care was taken to verify them. Herodotus is not the first historian to have praised hygiene in Egypt. Diodorus Siculus in the 1st century A.D. stated that: "The whole manner of life of Egyptians was so evenly ordered that it would appear as though it had been arranged according to the rules of health by a learned physician rather than by a law-giver"⁶



The importance of health to the average ancient Egyptian is seen in the composition of personal names and in the forms of daily greeting. Many names were formed with the *snb* (seneb) which means healthy, not with the negative meaning of health, absence of disease, but with the positive sense of vigor and efficiency. Such names as: 'I possess health', 'Let your father be healthy', were very common. All forms of greeting formulae, all letters,

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addresses, salutes and travel recommendation ended with wishes of good health.⁷

Ancient Egypt had environment health systems in place 5000 years ago to inspect its water supply, the lives of ancient Egyptian were shaped by the environment around them, both for good and for bad. The land, the River and climate were a great benefit to the people, but in some circumstances, that environment contributed to disease. The arid climate and religious necessity for preservation have given us a remarkable glimpse at the health of its people.⁸

Cleansing rituals are very important to the Egyptians, most people bath daily in the river or out of a water basin at home. The wealthy have a separate room in their home to bathe. Servants would pour jugs of water over their master and the runoff water drains away through a pipe that leads to the garden. Instead of soap a cleansing cream is used, made from oil, lime and perfume. People rub themselves daily with perfumed oil - made from flowers and scented wood and mixed with fat - to prevent their skin from drying out in the harsh climate. At parties, servants put cones of perfumed grease on the heads of the guests. As the grease melts, it runs down their face with a pleasing, cooling effect.⁹

The ancient Egyptians paid much attention to cleanliness of body and home, probably to a great extent for religious reasons. Among all economic and social classes washing was practiced every morning, evening, and before each meal, but since soap had not yet been invented a type of alkali was used.¹⁰

Women Diseases:

Ancient Egyptians suffered from a variety of diseases, both Congenital and acquired, which developed as a result of their Cultural practices and environment.¹¹

Ancient Egyptians may have portrayed themselves beautiful on the outside, but the inside story was not the same. Scholars who examined bone and lung tissues from a 3000-year-old women mummies from Thebes in the west Upper Egypt. The DNA analysis, coupled with X-ray and other findings, showed that Ancient Egyptians women suffered from many diseases.¹²



Women in ancient Egypt suffered from deadly diseases such as smallpox, leprosy, spina bifida, polio, cancer, diabetes, thyroid, vaginal and many, more. Even smaller problems, such as diarrhea and cuts, could still prove fatal. Some women suffered from rheumatism and abscessed doctors or scribes, other than giving advice for such conditions, occasionally even got into giving advice for such things as 'female troubles' and tips for the complexion.¹³

All men and women share certain experiences.

All are born, all suffer illnesses during their lives, and all must sooner or later die whether from disease, degenerative process, accident, or violence. The historian's overall view of ancient peoples is incomplete if he

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or she fails to take into account these phenomena of health or disease. The major lines of study of ancient diseases comprise examination of literary sources by scholars in collaboration with physicians, study of artistic representations in sculpture and painting, and study of skeletal remains and mummies by macroscopic examination, supplemented by radiography and by histological examination using light, polarizing, and electron microscopes.¹⁴

From the primary sources and the secondary or mediated sources, a range of women diseases is known from ancient Egypt¹⁵:

Amenorrhea: Ebers pap. Pres.833 for a woman who had been suffering from amenorrhea for years with vomiting and burning pain in abdomen.

Irregular menstruation: Ebers pap. Pres.832 for a woman with pains in one of hypogastric regions.

Hemorrhagia: Ebers pap. Pres.828- 830 with the title to stop hemorrhagia in woman.

Abortion: Ebers pap. Pres:797- 808 is for emptying uterus.

Pres.708 has the title to cause all that is in the woman's abdomen to come out.

Pres.800 has bears the title 'to separate the embryo from his mother'

Induction of Labour: may be deduced from Ebers pap. Pres.797 having the title "to cause a woman give birth"

To Know Fertility of Women: Berlin pap. Pres.199 says: Barley & corn irrigated daily by her urine; if both germinate then that means she will be fertile; if neither germinate then it means she is sterile; if barley only germinate she will give birth to a male child, if corn only germinate then she will give birth to a female child.

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Lactation: Ancient Egyptians were very keen on breast feeding. The importance of milk is illustrated in a statue of the sacred cow (Hathor) in Cairo museum.

Vaginitis: Gonorrhoeal vaginitis is probably meant by Ebers' pap. Pres.817 "For the woman patient who suffers from disease of her two labia" Treatment: a vaginal enema containing styrax, gum ammoniac, in cense & acacia juice.

Displacement of Uterus: Ebers pap. Pres.789 has the title "to put back the uterus in its natural position" contains a pessary of pine saw-dust, dregs and cloth.¹⁶

Fertility was diagnosed by placing garlic in the vagina for one night. If the next day the woman can taste or smell it in her mouth, she is fertile. This is based upon the connection between the genital parts and interior of the body. Such connection would be lost in a case of obstructed Fallopian tubes. In modern medicine, phenolphthalein injected in the uterus would appear in urine based upon the same principle. A test known to gynecologists as "Speck's test".¹⁷



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Ebers Medical Papyrus included a useful section dealing with women's health, concentrating on such all-important matters as conception, pregnancy and breastfeeding:

Prescription to cause a women's womb to go back to its proper place: tar that is on the wood of a ship is mixed with the dregs of excellent beer, and the patient drinks this¹⁸.

In ancient Egypt there were no known words for midwife, obstetrician, or gynecologist.

But because ancient Egyptians did not have words for these things does not mean that they did not exist. In Ancient Egypt the midwife came in many forms. For peasants the midwife was a friend, neighbor, and/or family member who helped deliver the baby.

For noblewomen and wealthier classes the midwife was usually a maidservant or nurse who already lived in the household. Midwives at this time did not have formal training to learn their trade.¹⁹

Cancer:

Cancer begins when cells in a part of the body start to grow out of control. There are many kinds of cancer, but they all start because of out-of-control growth of abnormal cells.





<http://atlantisonline.smfforfree2.com/index.php?topic=26478.0>

Human beings and other animals have had cancer throughout recorded history. So it's no surprise that from the dawn of history people have written about cancer. Some of the earliest evidence of cancer is found among fossilized bone tumors, human mummies in ancient Egypt, and ancient manuscripts. Growths suggestive of the bone cancer called osteosarcoma have been seen in mummies. Bony skull destruction as seen in cancer of the head and neck has been found, too.²¹

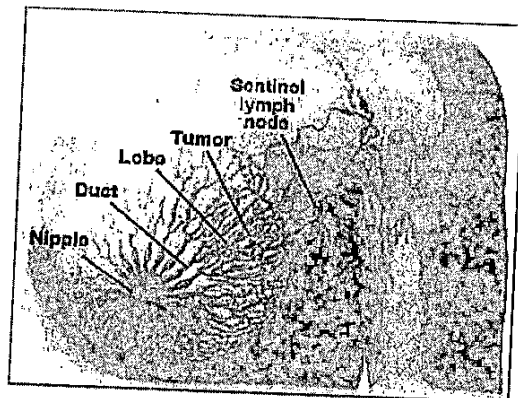
The oldest known description of human cancer is found in an Egyptian seven papyri or writing written between 3000-1500 BC. Two of them, known as the "Edwin Smith" and "George Ebers" papyri, contain details of conditions that are consistent with modern descriptions of cancer. The Edwin Smith Papyrus describes 8 cases of tumors or ulcers of the breast. The document acknowledged that there is no treatment for this condition and

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recommended cauterization (the fire drill) as a palliative measure. The ancient Egyptian medicine typically mixed medicine and religion. These physicians treated patients for several forms of cancer. Hieroglyphic inscriptions and papyri manuscripts suggest that these ancient physicians were able to distinguish between benign and malignant tumors. They suggested that the surface tumors may be removed surgically much similar to the current medical practice. Compounds of barley, pig's ear and other indigenous materials were suggested as treatment for cancer of the stomach and the uterus. Other commonly dispensed medications included ointments, enemas, castor oil, suppositories, poultices and animal parts.²²

Breast Cancer:

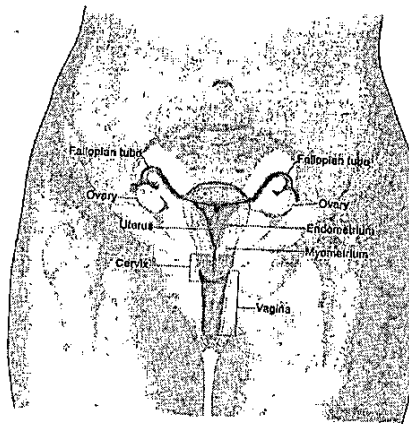
Ancient Egyptians were the first to note the disease more than 3,500 years ago. Both the Edwin Smith and George Ebers papyri contain descriptions of conditions that are consistent with modern descriptions of



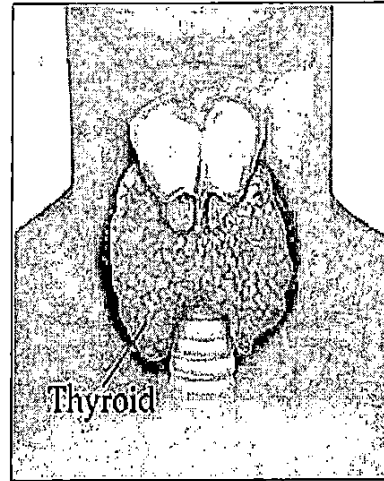
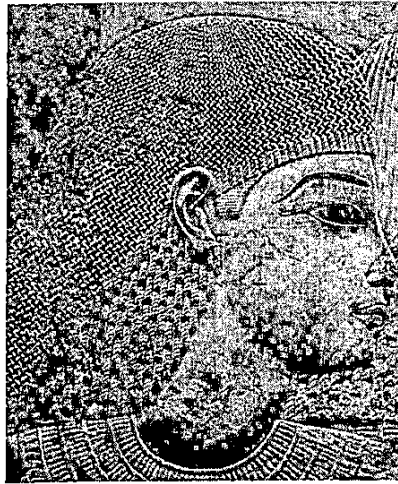
breast cancer. For example, one nameless ancient Egyptian surgeon describes "bulging tumors" in the breast and states that "there is no cure."²³

Cancer of Uterus:

According to Ebbell this disease was meant to be treated by Ebers pap. Pres. 813 - 815 which have the title "against the devouring disease (cancer) which causes a devouring ulcer in her uterus" (Phagedena).²⁴



Thyroid disease in pregnancy:



One test for pregnancy used by the ancient Egyptians was to tie a reed round a woman's neck. If it snapped the woman was pregnant. The snapping was caused by enlargement of the thyroid, but enlargement is just one of the changes of the thyroid during pregnancy. Undiagnosed pregnancy may even be confused with thyrotoxicosis because of the enlargement, the increased metabolic rate, and the rise in total thyroid hormone concentration caused by oestrogen enhancing synthesis of thyroxin binding globulin.²⁵

Obesity:

The ancient Egyptians should have had abundant health. But they didn't. In fact, they suffered pretty miserable health. Many had heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity.²⁶

Ancient Egyptian stone reliefs show occasional obese people, such as a cook in Ankh-ma-Hor's tomb (sixth Dynasty: 2340-2180 B.C), and a fat man enjoying food presented to him by his lean servant, in Mereruka's tomb. Studies of the reconstructed skin folds of royal mummies suggest that some were fat, including Queen Inhapy, Hatshepsut. Hatshepsut's mummy is that

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of an obese, diabetic 50 year old woman with bad teeth. Hatshepsut's mummy is that it appears that she died from metastatic cancer.²⁷

Diabetes:

Diabetes is not new disease, being first documented in 1550 B.C in Egypt. Back then diabetes, or what historians believe was diabetes, was described as a rare disease. An Egyptian manuscript mentions "the passing of too much urine", which historians take as the first reference to diabetes.²⁸

Ebers pap. Pres. 197 is according to B.Ebbell a care of? Diabetes his translation runs as follow:

"If thou examinest a man for illness in cardia, whose body shrinks, being altogether bewitched; if thou examinest him and dost not find disease in his belly, but the (henwt) of the body is like (pit), then thou shalt say to him: it is a decay (?) Of thy inside. Thou shalt prepare for him remedies against it: ground dragon's bloods from Elephantine, flaxseed colocynth, are boiled with oil and honey and eaten by the man for 4 mornings, so that perishes and the decay (?) of his inside may be expelled"²⁹

Heart Disease:

From the Ebers papyrus says:

*"If you examine a man because of suffering in his stomach, and he suffers, in his arm, his breast ...the side of his stomach, one says concerning it is the wadj disease. Then you shall say concerning it... death approaching"*³⁰

The Egyptians believed that the heart, rather than the brain, was the source of human wisdom, as well as emotions, memory, the soul and the personality itself. Notions of physiology and disease were all connected in concept to the heart, and it was through the heart that God spoke, giving ancient Egyptians knowledge of God and God's will. For this reason it was

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considered the most important of the body's organs. However, despite the ancient Egyptian's seemingly advanced medical and surgical knowledge, the heart's role in blood circulation was not precisely understood.³¹

It was felt that from the heart, channels (metu) linked all parts of the body together. These channels delivered not only blood, but also air, tears, saliva, mucus, sperm, nutriment and even bodily waste. In fact, the only real function of the brain was thought to be to pass mucus to the nose, so it was one of the organs that were discarded during mummification.³²

Probably to some extent, this concept of channels may have had some symbolism with the Nile. Ancient Egyptians were thought to be in good health if the metu were clear and without blockage. Disease was caused when a channel became blocked, much like an irrigation canal cannot deliver water if it is blocked.³³

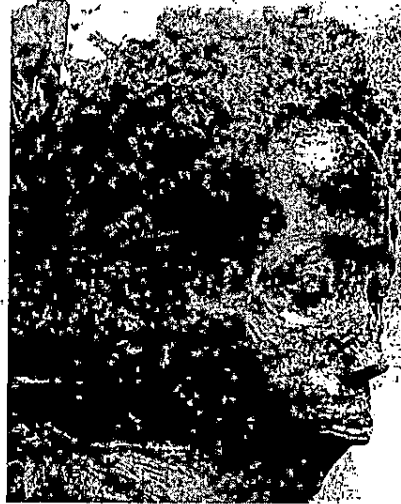
In the final judgment portrayed by the Book of the Dead, the heart of the deceased was shown being weighed against the feather of Ma'at, a symbol of universal truth, harmony and balance. Anubis was sometimes shown adjusting the balance of the scales slightly in favor of the deceased, to ensure it into the underworld. The heart was thought to be given back to the deceased in the afterlife.³⁴

For this reason, the heart was one of the only organs not removed from the body during mummification. Of course there was concern that the heart might testify against the deceased, so in order to prevent this, a heart scarab was often wrapped within the bandages. The inscription on the scarab would most likely consist of Chapter 30 from the Book of the Dead.³⁵

According to Memphite theological treatise "The action of the arms, the movement of the legs, and of every part of the body, is dedicated by order of the heart". Describing old age Sinuhe writes. " My eyes are heavy; my arms without strength, my legs refuse to work because my heart is tired" ³⁶

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The Egyptian princess Ahmose-Meryet-Amon, who lived in Thebes between 1580-1550 B.C and who is now known to be first person in human history with diagnosed coronary artery disease; a condition caused by a buildup of arterial plaque, which can lead to heart attack or stroke. Ahmose-Meryet-Amon, "Child of the Moon, Beloved of Amun" had blockages in five major arteries, including those that supply blood to the brain and heart.³⁷



The most ancient Egyptian afflicted with atherosclerosis was Lady Rai, she was alive from approximately 1570 B.C to 1530 B.C early in the 18th dynasty who served as nursemaid to Queen Ahmose Nefertari. She is the oldest known mummy to have evidence of atherosclerosis; she had definite disease in her aortic arch. She died at an estimated age of 30 to 40 years.³⁸



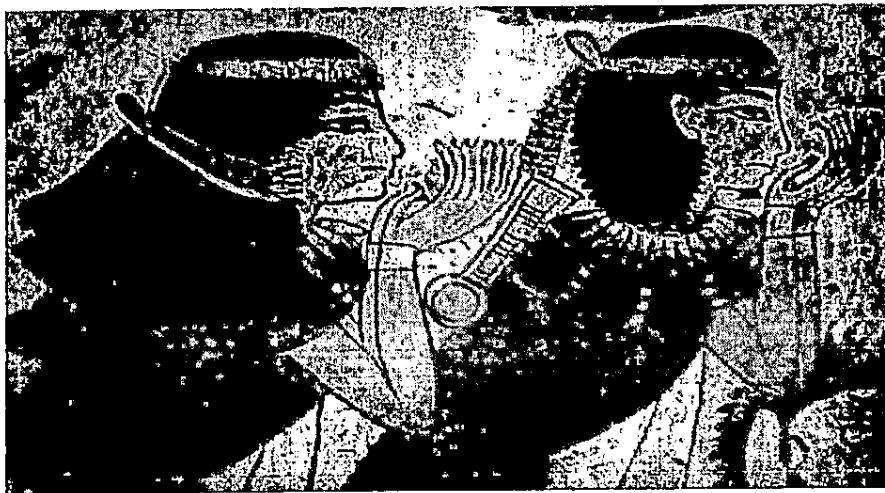
Conclusion

Women Healthcare in Ancient Egypt was closely looked after by the ancient Egyptian. Physicians obstetrics and gynecology were present in ancient Egypt, together with a number of midwives.

Women in ancient Egypt, beauty were an integral part of their society. Beauty was always side by side with their mortal existence and even in their afterlife. They believed that the more beautiful you are, the closer you will be to the gods.

Ancient Egyptians may have portrayed themselves beautiful on the outside, but the inside story was not the same. Scholars who examined bone and lung tissues from a 3000-year-old women mummies from Thebes in the west Upper Egypt. The DNA analysis, coupled with X-ray and other findings, showed that Ancient Egyptians women suffered from many diseases.

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