In Search of the Roots of Medicine: Yesterday and Today

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Minoan Culture, 2500–1500 BC
Mycenaean Culture, 1700–1100 BC
First Olympic Games, 776 BC
Hippocrates, 460–370 BC
STFM Greece Trip, 2002 AD
My Big Fat Greek Wedding, 2002 AD

I was part of the group of 130 enthusiastic travelers that gathered at JFK International Airport on Tuesday, October 22, 2002, to begin the STFM Tour of Greece. Three years in the planning, this trip promised to help us search for the roots of medicine and serve as a worthy capstone marking Dr. Nikitas Zervanos’ long and successful career at the Lancaster (Pa) General Family Practice Residency Program.

Beyond that, I knew little else except that the trip was 2 weeks in the midst of an incredibly busy travel and meeting schedule, it was to a place I never had much interest in visiting, and there were quite a few of my friends who would also be on the trip. As someone who travels a lot, I had applied my usual successful formula—cram as much as possible into the biggest suitcase available, do last-minute, desperation overnight express shopping, and buy more guide books (a total of five) than could possibly be read in even 2 months. I had glanced at a few sections of the books and had to admit I was becoming more excited about seeing some of the ancient sites and some of the places so closely connected with the early Christian church. But, if the trip had been canceled at the last moment, I would not have been overly disappointed. In retrospect, had such a cancellation occurred, what a personal loss that would have been!

It is extremely difficult to summarize a trip that covered 4,000 years, eight cities, seven islands, a minor earthquake, and the three generations of family medicine in the United States. I am not interested in providing a travelogue but rather I want to share some of my mind’s journal of the trip and some of the lessons I was privileged to learn. The two most lasting impressions are of the people met and traveled with and the very real sense of antiquity coexisting with immediacy. Let me explain.

The Greek people were friendly and hospitable and obviously quite proud that over thousands of years and numerous wars and political takeovers, their language, culture, and religion have survived. They know their history and mythology well. They are also excited about hosting the world for the next summer Olympics. I would go back in a heartbeat.

It was most appropriate that we had all three generations of US family medicine represented on this trip in search of medicine’s roots. We had those who were the first to be program directors, department chairs, and preceptors for the new specialty of family practice, as well as those who as hospital administrators, specialty consultants, staff, and patients had greatly supported the newborn discipline. The second generation was also well represented with much diversity in practice sites and content. We were also fortunate to have members of the third generation—those only recently in practice and residents in training. Colleagues from the United Kingdom, Panama, Canada, and Switzerland also joined us. There was an energy and connection to family medicine that was palpable.

From 4 hours of CME our first morning after the all-night flight, to hard treks up ancient hillsides, to a 2-hour discussion of the Future of Family Medicine project during one of our precious few free afternoons on board ship, people showed up, participated fully, and were ready for more. There was a real thirst for knowledge and for understanding. Whether to simply gain a better sense of Greek history, see how our democracy and language are connected with theirs, or to determine where we as physicians and teachers fit in that ancient landscape, it really was a search for many of us.

All around us were 4,000 years of history, and much more was unseen beneath our feet where artifacts and buildings long since buried by earthquakes, storms, and centuries of living lay. It was an amazing experience to walk in the footsteps of Socrates and Plato, to stroll along the road once traveled by Antony and Cleopatra, to follow the same path trod by thousands others who had sought divine guidance from the Oracle at Delphi and to see Ephesus, Corinth, and the cave where the Book of Revelations was written. We gazed upon beautiful frescoes and figures from the Minoan civilization and stood un-
under the plane tree on Kos where Hippocrates had walked. In many of the historic sites, the guides related that what we were seeing today had been built on the same site previously used by several other cultures. I was particularly impressed that holy/sacred places were recognized as being such by many successive generations and conquerors. It was not uncommon to have several different temples and then a church all having laid claim to the same spot of land.

The ultimate goal of our search was the island of Kos and the land of Hippocrates, which seemed a worthy aim. While the Greeks did not invent medicine and clearly drew on the knowledge and practices from many older cultures and other lands, Hippocrates was a significant figure. His contributions cannot be understood outside of the context of these other influences as well as an understanding of the medicine prior to his time that had numerous rituals and ceremonies and was closely linked with philosophy, mysticism, superstition, and folklore.

Hippocrates has been credited with the founding of the rational approach to medicine and as such is contemporary with much of what we do. He conceptualized the patient as “a physical, mental, and spiritual whole and denied supernatural explanations and removed the art of medicine from the realm of superstition and magic.” No longer was disease a curse of the gods or punishment. He believed that to be a good physician, one had to first be a good human being. He was conservative with treatment, stressed diagnosis and prognosis based on the clinical evaluation of the patient, wrote that to do nothing is sometimes good treatment, and based much of his writing on “the authority of observed facts.”

Sound familiar?

“There is nothing new under the sun—everything comes from the Greeks.” (Greek tour guide and My Big Fat Greek Wedding)

Let me provide a quotation from Hippocrates to demonstrate how timely some of his messages still are.

Life is short, and the art long, the right time an instant, treatment precarious, and the judgment difficult. It is necessary for the physician not only to provide needed treatment but provide for the patient himself and for those beside him and to provide for his outside affairs (Hippocrates Aphorisms, L. IV, 458).

The following could well be titled Healthy People circa third century BC:

i. “The physician must investigate the entire patient and the environment.”
ii. “Human health cannot be treated separately from the natural environment.”
iii. “The physician must assist nature, which is the physician of the diseases”
iv. “The physician must cooperate with the patient, the patient’s attendants, and external circumstances.”
v. “Nothing happens without a natural cause.”
vi. “The best physician is the one who is able to prevent and predict.”
vii. “All excess is hostile to nature.”
viii. “For extreme diseases, extreme strictness of treatment is most efficacious.”
ix. “The brain is the most powerful organ (messenger of consciousness) to the human body.”
x. “When more nourishment is taken than the constitution can stand, disease is caused.”

The city of Kos and the people of the Asclepion (school) of Kos reenacted an ancient ritual that might have been carried out prior to treatment of the patients assembled there on any given day. We then stood around the altar of Athena and recited the Hippocratic Oath at the exact site of the medical school where Hippocrates’ former students had taught and practiced medicine. This was a holy and sacred place to the people of ancient Greece and to all the students and patients who came there over the years—a place worthy of respect and veneration dedicated to a single purpose. Our sense of connection to what had been taught there and how medicine had begun to change had drawn us over a distance of nearly 2,500 years and thousands of miles.

We in family medicine are once again searching for our roots through the Future of Family Medicine project. We must find our deepest and truest roots that will nourish us as we adapt and move/evolve into what is most needed. We are looking to find our sacred place as we truly have stood on the temples and holy places of those in medicine who went before. Have we found new enlightenment these past 2,500 years, or are we still seeking the best way and place to serve? May we do as the guide at Kos described—may we treat the past with respect, may we live in peace with others different from ourselves, and, I would add, may we help build a health care system for the United States that is just, effective, and responsive to the needs of our patients and communities, one that visitors in ages hence will want to come and visit and rededicate themselves to the vision and new place that we created.

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References