

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Hippocratic Categorization and Classification of Diseases

Abstract

Hippocratic treatises are early text of medicine, compiled by several scholars, collectively known as Hippocratic Corpus. For the first times in history, Hippocrates rejects the divine theory of disease and laid-down the foundation of scientific medicine. Diseases were described on natural causes. They proposed humoral theory of diseases. According to this theory, there are four humors in the body. Harmony among these humors constitutes a good health. Age, sex, season, diet and regime affect the production of humors and impart their effect on the condition of body. Various ways were adopted for categorization and classification of diseases, making medical studies easier. In these treatises, diseases were broadly categorized based on age, sex and population distribution. Nomenclature of disease was also based upon the name of diseased organ, dominating symptom, etiology and its resemblance with the thing and phenomenon in outer world. This study is focused on understanding Hippocratic classification and categorization of diseases.

Key words: Hippocrates, Humors, Treatise, Classification

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Introduction

The Hippocratic Corpus is a heterogeneous collection of approximately sixty primeval medical texts. Most of these treatises were compiled between the second half of the 5th century BC and the first half of the 1st century BC, by different scholars (Totelin, 2013, p. 18). It is believed that none of these treatises was authored by Hippocrates himself, but they are collectively known as the Hippocratic Corpus (Totelin, 2013, p. 19; Pormann, 2018, p. 1). These treatises are early texts of medicine, defining at the same time the birth of scientific medicine. The Hippocratic doctrine not only rejected the supernatural causes of disease, but also laid down the foundations of scientific medicine, on the basis of humoral theory (Jouanna, 2012, p. 55; Høyrup, 2020, p. 142). This theory first appeared in the Hippocratic treatise *The Nature of Man* (5th century BC), possibly written by students of Hippocrates and his son-in-law Polybus (Jouanna, 2012, p. 335). According to this theory, there are four humors in the body – Blood, Phlegm, Yellow Bile and Black Bile. Good health is defined as the balance between these humors, the lack of which can lead to diseases. (Pormann, 2018, p. 17) Climatic conditions, seasons, constitution, age and diet of a person affect the harmony of humors and may cause disease. In the Hippocratic Corpus, diseases were described by observation and reasoning (Page, et al, 1957, p. xiv), while they were categorized on the basis of the causes and the affected geographical area. The diseases could be general (epidemic), local (endemic) and miscellaneous (sporadic) diseases. General diseases are those which affect a large group of population at the same time, in the same geographical area, due to common causes (Hippocrates, 2014, p. 71). The term “loimos” was used to designate the category of general diseases, caused by a “pestilence”, common among all the people in that geographical area (Jouanna, 2012, p. 124). General diseases are mostly caused by the inhalation of morbid air or consumption of shared food. Shared drink and shared over- exertion can rarely cause general diseases (Pormann, 2018, pp. 111-117; Hippocrates, 2014, p. 71).

Galen explains that general disease occurs when the natural composition of season has become corrupt. Local (endemic) disease strikes inhabitants of the particular area where it occurs. According to the Hippocratic treatise *On Water, Air and Places*, the local disease of each region depends on the conditions of the location. Plague is mentioned as an example of a local disease. The miscellaneous diseases are those which affect people individually and each of them has a specific cause (Hippocrates, 2014, p. 83). In the Hippocratic Corpus, diseases were further categorized on the basis of sex and age. To treat patients, these authors strongly recommended to examine the season, region, age while studying diseases (Jouanna, 2012, p. 69).

There are ten treatises in the Corpus that are related with the subject of gynecological, obstetric and embryological development (Totelin, 2013, p. 22).



The treatise *Diseases of Women I* explains the female reproductive physiology and describes gynecological problems and diseases in a chronological order: menstruation, infertility, miscarriage, birth and post-partum complications (Page, et al, 1957; Hanson, 1975, pp. 567-584).

Diseases of Women II deals with abnormal uterine discharge and movements of uterus.

The Barren Women addresses the causes of female infertility, the signs of pregnancy and fertility, indicators of the baby's sex, treatments for infertility, uterus prolapse and other conditions, namely, a short description for the excision of a dead foetus (Jouanna, 2012, pp. 5-6).

The treatise *On the seventh and eighth month child* discusses fetal development during these two months (Totelin, 2013, p. 23).

The Sacred Disease focuses on epilepsy, discarding any supernatural intervention (Pormann, 2018, p. 94; Jouanna, 2012, p. 62).

The surgical treatises deal with traumatic and non-traumatic surgery: soft tissue injuries, bone fractures and dislocations in the first category, while fistulae, hemorrhoids and ulcers are among the non-traumatic surgical issues (Pormann, 2018, p. 14).

There are also five nosological treatises in the Hippocratic Corpus: *Diseases I*, *Diseases II*, *Diseases III*, *Affections* and *Internal Affections* (Totelin, 2013, p. 25). The term nosology itself is derived from the Greek words “nosos”, the disease and “logos”, the discourse (Pormann, 2018, p. 180). The nosological treatises are mainly concerned with the description of disease (Totelin, 2013, pp. 25-26). The Hippocratic disease classification follows mainly the “a capite ad calcem” (from head to toes) style, implying that the diseases are arranged according to the affected body parts in canonical order starting from the head.

Disease I has three parts: the first one is not nosological, but deals with broad issues and the general practice of medicine, the second part is an almost monographic review of different types of suppuration and the last part deals with fever and the origin of shivers and sweat (Pormann, 2018, pp. 188-190).

Disease II is composed of two sub-treatises. The first one describes fourteen diseases of the head and throat. In the second part, there are again diseases of the nose, chest and back, most of which have been discussed in the first part as well (Totelin, 2013, p. 25).

Disease III has three parts: the first one is just two lines attaching it to a preceding work on fevers, the second is a nosological work a capite ad calcem, while the last part contains a collection of cooling remedies.

Affections is also divided into two parts. Out of the sixty-one chapters, the first thirty-eight is a nosological work with illnesses classified a capite ad calcem, while the rest is a dietetic part (Totelin, 2013, p. 26; Pormann, 2018, p. 191). *Affections* begins with a preface underlining that all diseases are caused by bile



and phlegm (Totelin, 2013, p. 26). A group of chapters is devoted to four acute diseases: pleurisy, pneumonia, phrenitis and “kausos” (an ardent fever). The diseases characterized by fever are called “acute”, and occur most frequently and violently in winter (Pormann, 2018, p. 182). The opposite class of “long” or “chronic diseases” takes longer to appear, but finally the distinction between “acute” and “chronic” diseases has become the standard in Greek and Latin medical literature, and is still pretty much in use today.

Internal Affections is the longest nosological treatise. A total of fifty-four diseases are classified a capite ad calcem, starting with afflictions of the chest and being grouped on a formula based on numerical value, like three tetanuses, four jaundices, etc. The acute diseases are grouped separately in this treatise. This treatise is also the only one that contains thick diseases (diseases that make patient dull).

According to Galen, many different ways of disease differentiation are adopted in the Hippocratic Corpus: the affected body parts, the dominating symptom, a combination of both, the causes of disease or similarity with things (Pormann, 2018, p. 192).

Discussion

The Hippocratic Corpus includes the first texts of scientific medicine. It has been compiled by different physicians and transmitted from generation to generation. In the course of its journey, it has also been edited by several scholars. In these treatises, the entire medical phenomenon is explained by natural causes. The humoral theory is the core of the explanation of health and diseases. The medical knowledge is described in a sequential order to simplify its complexity, but these sequences are not observed alike in all the treatises. For example, *Disease of Women I* begins with the differences between men and women, and progresses in a sequential order from menstruation, to conception, pregnancy, delivery and post-partum issues. Different gynecological problems are described in separate chapters (Hanson, 1975, pp. 567-584). These descriptions of diseases also follow a reasoning-based sequence, like identification, symptoms, treatment and possible prognostic remarks of diseases.

In the treatise *On Superfoetation*, the first chapter dealt with superfoetation itself and the remaining chapters were devoted to obstetric disorders in a sequential order, from difficulties in delivery, to problems with pregnancy, conception and menstruation. The sequence followed in this treatise was the opposite of the one adopted in the *Diseases of Women I* (Totelin, 2013, p. 25).

The Barren Women began with causes of female infertility, indications of fertile women, sex determination methods for the foetus, treatment of infertility and pregnancy disorders.

The description of diseases in the nosological treatises also follows a sequence,



but again this sequence is not uniformly followed in other treatises. For example, in *The Internal Affections*, the sequence for the description of disease is as follows: the name of the disease, the etiology, symptoms, therapeutics and the possible prognosis. This is contrary to that found in the *Disease III*, where the prognosis is mentioned before therapeutics. Diseases needed surgical interventions are described in the surgical treatises, which are typically divided into traumatic and non-traumatic surgery.

There are also seven books of epidemics, supposedly compiled by different authors. The description of diseases again follows a different sequence, such as the description of the disease, their differentiation, etiology, symptoms, preventive measures and prognostic comments. Case studies follow a sequential order, providing patient's details and progress in a chronological order of symptoms, with slight variations (Hippocrates, 2014, p. 12).

From the above discussion, it is clear that the medical knowledge included in the Hippocratic Corpus has been arranged in a rational way to simplify its complexity. Diseases are categorized on the basis of age and sex of the patients, their etiology, symptomatology, as well as their seasonal and geographical context.

Conclusion

The proper nomenclature, classification and categorization of diseases are important for the simplification of medical studies. It is also the first step towards the research and development of nosology. It is evident that, in an early historical period, the Greeks adopted mainly symptomatic classification of diseases. The Hippocratic classification and categorization of diseases are important to understand the description of diseases in the Hippocratic Corpus and to provide a framework for modern nosology studies.

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