

The Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus: ancient Egyptian medicine

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Background

In around 1825 BC, the 29th year of the reign of Amenemhat, someone (probably a physician) recorded that date on the back of a papyrus, which formed part of a group of medical texts originating from the land of the Pharaohs. Those papyri would be brought into the modern world in April and November 1889 by Flinders Petrie. They were found on a site near the modern day Egyptian town of Lehun. The so-called Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus is one of the largest manuscripts dating from the late Middle Kingdom (1850–1700 BC). ‘Kahun’ is the name Petrie gave to the Lehun town site, which in 1825 BC had been a thriving, prosperous town. The papyrus had been so heavily used that its ancient owner had to repair it, with a patch bearing an administrative fragment visible at one point on the back.

In the late Victorian period and into the early 20th century there was a worldwide fascination for all things Egyptian. Egypt had sparked the romantic imagination and there was great demand to find yet more artefacts among the tombs. As man wondered at the sight of the lapis lazuli and golden jewellery, there were also the fascinating Kahun medical papyri. These were no ordinary ancient papyri, but the earliest medical texts known, relating to gynaecological medicine almost 4000 years ago.

The work was discovered to be in many fragments, but after careful reassembly, although there were gaps in some of the scripts, there appeared the first primary evidence about female medicine and health in an ancient civilisation possessing great power and influence.

The work was translated and published by F Griffiths in 1893, and published in *The Petrie Papyri: Hieratic Papyri from Kahun and Gurob*.

Papyrus contents

The work is divided into 34 paragraphs, each section dealing with a specific medical problem or complaint. The text has a distinctive style: first, there is a brief account of the symptoms, then the physician is advised how to address the patient in offering their diagnosis and, finally, a recommended treatment is suggested. No mention is, however, made of the likely prognosis. This process of described symptoms, diagnosis, report and treatment makes up 17 sections. An example of one such description of a medical problem appears in Column 1, Lines 1–5 (Bibliography item 2):²

[Examination] “of a woman whose eyes are aching till she cannot see, on top of aches in her neck”.

[You should say of it] “it is discharges of the womb in her eyes”.

[You should treat it] “by fumigating her with incense and fresh oil, fumigating her womb with it, and fumigating her eyes with goose leg fat. You should have her eat a fresh ass liver”.

There seemed to be a belief in ancient Egyptian times that much illness was generated throughout the whole body as a result of various conditions of the womb, some of which defy logic in terms of how they might be linked to one another. Descriptions include “wandering womb”, “womb discharge” and “terror of the womb”, all of which seem capable of causing difficulties with eyes, teeth, joints and the neck and head.

The suggested treatments are varied and interesting, and include fumigation, massage and medicines introduced into the body in the form of pessaries or as a liquid to be drunk or rubbed onto the skin. The cliché of “asses’ milk” also appears as part of the materia medica, and the ass is also used to provide liver and urine. More fragrant materials are also included such as various scented oils.

The text makes no suggestion of surgery, and interestingly there are direct parallels with Hippocratic and Galenic medical procedures such as fumigation and massage with oil.

The later paragraphs in the text turn their attention to pregnancy, with prescriptions for conception that include incense, fresh oil, dates and beer. There then appears in Column 3, Line 6 the first reference known to contraception. The section about pregnancy reads:

“For preventing [...] crocodile dung chopped over HAS and awyt-liquid, sprinkle [...] last [...].”

This is a most intriguing section for me personally, as over the years people have often told me they have heard about crocodile dung being inserted into the vagina and packed against the cervix as a contraceptive. The prescription contained within the Kahun papyrus does not say that the dung is pressed into the body; it may mean burning it as an incense as fumigation. The *“awyt-liquid”* is sour milk. Until I see evidence of crocodile dung inserted in the vagina in any other ancient texts I remain unconvinced.

The next section (Column 3, Line 7) offers another form of contraception, namely: *“honey, sprinkle over her womb, this to be done on a natron bed”*. [NB. Natron, a carbonate salt, was ancient Egypt’s supreme cleansing product. It was used for household cleansing as well as to cleanse the human body.]

There then follow sections of text describing various gynaecological conditions and treatments including another section of broken text that describes a “birth brick”. Sadly, however, the text offers no further information as to how such an intriguingly named item might be used.

Testing for fitness to conceive takes up two further paragraphs and seems to be focused on whether the woman has something “on” (such as a sty) her eye. Eyes and wombs are yet again linked in Egyptian medicine.

Concluding remarks

So despite the breaks in some sentences and paragraphs in the papyrus, these texts provide us with a

fascinating insight into ancient Egyptian gynaecology, contraception and conception techniques. The ancient words also supply yet more evidence of man’s desire to heal and control fertility.

The Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus (UC 32057) is housed at University College London, London, UK.

About the author Lesley Smith is currently a postgraduate student in the Centre for the History of Medicine of the University of Birmingham, where she is developing a PhD in obstetrics and gynaecology in early modern Britain. She holds an honorary degree for ‘services to history’. She makes 200–300 public appearances a year and also works as a TV historian in the UK and abroad including the USA. Lesley is also Curator of Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire and is a member of the Society of Apothecaries of London and the Society of Medical Writers. Lesley has very recently become a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

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