

Introduction

The teachings of Hippocrates dominated medical thinking from the 4th century B.C. to the beginning of the 19th century. They first spread to Rome, where the Greek physician Galen (A.D. 130–200) was active in all fields of medicine. His writings were studied by physicians also in the Arab world empire, where Hippocratic medicine found a refuge from the harsh cultural climate that prevailed in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. As Islamic medicine, it re-entered Southern Europe in the 10th century and established itself at the famous medical school of Salerno and the medical faculties of the universities of Bologna and Montpellier.

It was not the acute clinical perception of the Hippocratic physicians, which we nowadays admire so much, that gave classic medicine its amazing power of survival. Instead it was the doctrine of the four body humors. Their correct proportions determined the health of the individual and all diseases could ultimately be traced to a disturbance of the delicate balance between blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile. Hippocratic medicine was therefore rather indifferent to a correct diagnosis, which we consider to be all-important. In the final analysis, all diseases had the same origin, disturbances of the body fluids, and the treatment was always the same — different kinds of blood-letting, emetics and laxatives. It was all aimed at restoring the correct balance between the body humors.

Not even during the renaissance and the scientific revolution of the 17th century, when Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564) rejuvenated anatomy and William Harvey (1578–1657) laid the foundation of modern physiology with his discovery of the circulation of the blood, was there any change in the uncritical reliance of clinical medicine on Hippocrates and Galen. It was not until the beginning of the 19th century that scientifically based medicine started to emerge not only in the laboratories but also to some extent on the clinics. Towards the middle of the century, medical thinking becomes more and more centered around the structural element that seemed to be the ultimate building stone of all living organisms — the cell.