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Mental health and sexual activity according to ancient Greek physicians

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The ancient Greek physicians have not failed in their studies to indicate the beneficial role of sexual activity in human health. They acknowledged that sex helps to maintain mental balance. Very interesting is their observation that sex may help mental patients to recover. Nevertheless they stressed emphatically that sex is beneficial only when there is a measure in it, so they believed that sexual abstinence or excessive sexual activity affect negatively the mental and physical health of man. Ancient Greek physicians reached this conclusion by empirical observation. They tried to justify the mental imbalance, as the potential physical problems, which probably will be listed today in the psychosomatic manifestations, of people with long-term sexual abstinence or hyperactivity, based on the theory of humors which was the main methodological tool of ancient Greek medicine. Their fundamental idea was that the four humors of the body (blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile) should be in balance. Therefore they believed that the loss and the exchange of bodily fluids during sex help body's humors to maintain their equilibrium which in turn will form the basis for the physical and mental health. Although in ancient medical texts the irrationality presented by people in the aforementioned conditions was not attributed in any of the major mental illnesses recognized in antiquity, as mania, melancholy and phrenitis, our belief is that their behavior is more suited to the characteristics of melancholy, while according to modern medicine it should be classified in the depressive disorders. We have come to this conclusion, because common characteristics of people who either did not have sexual life or was overactive, was sadness, lack of interest and hope, as well as paranoid thinking that can reach up to suicide. Regarding the psychosomatic problems, which could occur in these people, they were determined by the ancient Greek physicians in the following; continuous headaches and heaviness, dilatancy, pain, dysuria and fever. But all these symptoms would disappear when the man gained a measure sexual activity, as was categorically stated by Galen. It is striking that these ideas were

maintained over time, starting already from the authors of the Hippocratic Corpus, from which the distinguished work *De virginum morbis*, refers indeed to women who reached the point of suicide due to the absence sexual life, hanging themselves or falling into wells and eventually passing to the works of Rufus of Ephesus, Soranus of Ephesus and Galen.

Key words: Sex life, depression, melancholy, mania, ancient greek medicine.

Introduction

It was a common notion amongst ancient Greek physicians that people must be sexually active¹ while maintaining a balance in this activity. This belief was based on the premise of the theory of humors on the foundations that either sexual abstinence or excessive sexual activity contributed to the unbalance of those humors in the body which results to disturbance of mental² and corporal health.³ On the other hand a well-adjusted sexual life contributed to balanced humors and a good health. In fact ancient Greek physicians had observed that people with absent or excessive sexual life presented corporal and mental diseases,⁴ mostly mania⁵ (madness) and melancholy⁶ (depression) and in order to explain the pathophysiology of these diseases they used the theory of the four humors, which was their basic methodological tool.⁷

The Hippocratic corpus

From the Hippocratic Corpus⁸ we are informed that one of the oldest prognoses according to Hippocratic school of medicine is that not only athletes but also those who suffered from diseases, knew that their health will deteriorate in case of lack of food, of over-eating and over-drinking, of not walking or of excessive sexual activity as it is described in the book *Prorrhethicon* (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. *Prorrhethicon* 2.1.14–19).⁹ Moreover, in the book *De morbis popularibus* it is highlighted that it should be a measure in sexual life as in hunger, in food, in drinking, in sleeping, in physical exercise and in fatigue, in order to maintain a healthy body (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. *De morbis popularibus* 6.6.2.–3).¹⁰ However it is stressed that sexual activity is an element of health (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. *De morbis popularibus* 6.8.23.1–2).¹⁰

A very important work on sexual life in Hippocratic Corpus can be found in the book about the diseases of the virgins, *De virginum morbis* (Hippocrates Med. et Corp. *De virginum morbis* 1.1–45),¹¹ not only because there the theory of humors is applied in the analysis of the sexual life, but also because it is a work that clearly deals with mental and psychosomatic problems that derive from sexual deprivation.

This work indicates that sexual intercourse helps the body to maintain the equilibrium of the humors by loosing and receiving liquids. Furthermore the absurdity of a woman without a sex life is emphasized, which leads sometimes to committing suicide, that is why there is the advice of a sooner than later beginning of sexual life. In this situation the cause of the insanity is attributed to the theory of humors and especially in a specific state which is formed in the blood. It is believed that blood is accumulated in the area of the diaphragm (locus of logic)¹² and the heart and thus –according to its characteristics– it causes a special paranoiac manifestation that is respectively the same as that of the main mental diseases in antiquity, mania,⁵ melancholy,¹³ phrenitis.¹⁴ The paranoia of the virgins could be milder or more severe. When it was milder, it was believed that the accumulated blood was transformed to phlegm⁸ provoking acute inflammation, and when it was severe this blood was septic. In these severe cases women could commit suicide, either by falling into a well or hanging themselves, while on the milder cases they presented depressive manifestations.

As much as the physical problems are concerned there is fever that comes and goes, as well as weakness in mobility for women, which is attributed to the accumulation of blood to the extremities. It is considered a consequence with the least problems as it is not life threatening. We would say that these are part of the psychosomatic manifestations, since

psychological distress can cause fever, that comes and goes as it is already mentioned in the text, and immobility which is characteristic of malaise and the lack of energy as a sign of weakness which are seen in the people with mental disorder.

Finally, the direct advice of an early beginning of a sexual life and childbearing is an empirical observation of ancient physicians pointed also by the writer of this work, which nonetheless conforms with the contemporary approach of the topic as well as with the contemporary conception that sexual activity can stimulate and help a person with mental problems.

Views of other physicians in ancient Greece

Rufus of Ephesus (1st century AD) would be one to embrace moderation in sexual life as we learn from the Byzantine physician, Aetius of Amida (1st half 6th century AD). The physician believes that intercourse is a natural activity and thus anything that is natural is not harmful. On the contrary it becomes harmful when moderation is lost and sexual activity is constant and at disagreeable time. He will therefore stress that this constant activity must be avoided when there is a disease in the nerves (paralysis and other neurological diseases related with movement), in the thorax, in the kidneys, in the waist and when there is ischialgia or podalgia. We would point out the reference to the thorax illness which gives the impression of pointing to a respiratory or heart problem which can be aggravated by intercourse (Aetius Med. *Iatricorum liber iii* 8.1–6).¹⁵

Similar ideas we find in the work of another Byzantine physician, Oribasios of Pergamon (325–395/6 AD), who also preserves the ideas of Rufus of Ephesus. In the text of the Byzantine physician we are informed that the ancient Greek physician does not praise cravings but suggests more restraint, especially if there is disease in the bladder, in the kidneys or epilepsy or mania which defers from the work of Aetius of Amida. In addition to the various physical diseases the observation introduced here is that in a manic patient sexual activity may deteriorate the condition. However another interesting suggestion is that when urges are under control and are acted upon in moderation then the body can cope with future diseases. Lastly, the general

rule is emphasized that man must combine the desires of the soul in harmony with those of the body, when it allows it, while excessive desire only serves the body; pointing clearly that people must not be prays to their physical desires of sex (Oribasius Med. *Collectiones medicae* 6.38.25.4–6.38.26.3).¹⁶

In another part of the work of Oribasios of Pergamon are preserved the suggestions of Rufus of Ephesus for what should be done in order to regain physical and mental balance in the case of a man being harmed by excessive sexual activity. He should therefore take a small number of walks, to take warm baths, have fresh food that will empower him, receive plenty of fluids, and sleep well enough and not to be agitated from rage, sadness, excessive entertainment, fever, perspiration, vomiting, drunkenness, fatigue, too much heat and too much cold (Oribasius Med. *Collectiones medicae* 25.1.1–25.1.8).¹⁶

Oribasios of Pergamon also saved Rufus' of Ephesus ideas about the benefit a person gets from sexual activity, which are based on the eucrasia of humors of the body.¹⁷ That is, it stresses that with sexual activity the body is emptied from the overgrowth of sperm and becomes more masculine. The positive influence touches also the soul because it resets the thought to accuracy and exempts from unrestrained anger. For this reason he points out that for the melancholic people sexual intercourse is a way of healing, while at the same time it makes mad people sane and is very useful to those who suffer from diseases related to phlegm. They eat more easily as they become anorexic. Also it is stressed that sexual intercourse helps many people to avoid frequent wet dreams (Oribasius Med. *Synopsis ad Eustathium filium* 1.6.1.1–1.6.4.1).¹⁸

Studying the views of Soranus of Ephesus (2nd half 1st century – early 2nd century AD) in his original work it is made very clear that he strictly follows the adaptation of the humoral theory concerning the topic of sexual life. He takes a closer look to the question of which is healthier for a woman, to stay virgin for a long period of time or to have sexual relations, quoting the various views of his predecessors.

The view in favor of the sexual relations is based on the arguments that not only sexually active women have sexual drives but also virgins. In fact some of these are considered to have experienced stronger

loving desires than the sexually active women. It is mentioned that some claimed that excretion of sperm was not harmful neither for women nor for men. Lack of norm harms the body when they constantly excoriate sperm. It is believed that they benefit when the excretion happens in regular bases so as to avoid clumsiness and discomfort, while many state that after the sexual activity they became more agile and braver (Soranus Med. *Gynaeciorum libri iv* 1.31.1.1–1.31.3.1).¹⁹

It is also made known that many women due to long widowhood presented urinal retention and a pain feeling when urinating but when they became sexually active again the problems ceased (Soranus Med. *Gynaeciorum libri iv* 1.31.3.11–1.31.4.1).¹⁹ We can say that this observation clearly suggests psychosomatic problems due to lack of sexual life.

Soranus of Ephesus is opposed to the above mentioned idea, thinking that virginity for a long period is healthy because intercourse entails risks which he elaborated on his chapter *Hygiene*. He gives the example of animals which we see to be more robust than those that are prevented of having sexual interaction. Moreover he gives another example of women who keep their virginity by the law or because they are dedicated to their religion and Gods, who do not die easily from disease. He also explains that the difficulty in urine cleansing and body fat observed in virgin women is caused by not participating in the beneficial physical activities which drives them at the following discomforts. That is why he concludes that as much as in men as well as in women staying a virgin for a long period is healthy, which will benefit them in breeding (Soranus Med. *Gynaeciorum libri iv* 1.32.1.1–1.32.3.4).¹⁹ We would say that the physician focuses more in the issue of prevention of infections related to sexual activity.

On the other hand studying the problem of fertility he finds that there must be erotic impulse and desire by men and women in order to be fertile; showing by this way their mood for intercourse as an element of health, following the established concept of Ancient Greek medicine (Soranus Med. *Gynaeciorum libri iv* 1.37.1.1–1.37.3.7).¹⁹

Galen (129 – ca. 210 AD) will follow the basic advice for moderation in sexual activity, commenting generally that just like any other activity the same

applies for sexual activity, that correctness lies in a healthy quantity, quality and circumstances (Galenus Med. *Thrasylbulus sive utrum medicinae sit an gymnasticae hygieine* 5.885.9–13).²⁰

Galen discussed sexual issues in a special work called, *De venereis*, which was saved by Oribasius of Pergamon where once more exemplifies the application of the theory of humors in sexual life (Oribasius Med. *Collectiones medicae* 6.37.1.1–6.37.11.6).¹⁶

In the beginning the wisely sexual function is pointed out as a healthy instruction. At that point the physician discusses the characteristics that the body must have during intercourse. Thus he emphasizes that even though none is healthy according to the Epicurus, more correct is the sexual activity with pauses, while during it the person should not feel uninhibited and think that he became lighter and with better breath. The time for intercourse is proper when the body is in the middle of all external conditions; neither overfull nor empty, neither cold nor overheated, or dried or really wet. If there must be some exaggeration, it should be minor. It is better for the body to be more heated rather than very cold and overfull, rather than empty and wet and overdried during sexual intercourse. Those who are weak due to lust become very ill. Those who are strong and have a disease related to phlegm cause a reduction to the rest humors. Harmless are the intercourses in wet and hot people and to those that by nature have a lot of semen. Lust also raises the temperature in robust. In those who are weaker the temperature rises and then falls greatly.

Furthermore he mentions the problems caused in body and soul during intercourse or in the absence of it, so we would say that he explores in detail the issues that had already been discussed by the physicians of the Hippocratic Corpus and Rufus of Ephesus. He stresses the facts that some of those who start intercourse at a young age end up patients. Some if do not have constant sexual intercourse feel heaviness in the head and develop fever, wish the worst and become spineless. Those of this nature, when being abstinent in sexual intercourse, end up stuporous and cumbersome, while some become unreasonably moody and hopeless like melancholic people, but all these stop at once with sexual intercourse; clearly referring to the work, *De virginum morbis*. Galen pon-

dering concludes according to the above that sperm retention is very harmful which is confirmed by his experience, hence he states that he met some people who for reasons of shame refrained from sexual activities, resulting to be stuporous and cumbersome.

Except of prompting for sexual activity, he does not forget to point out that those who are sickly due to age or other reasons but participate in sex life, should know that the reduce of strength is inevitable; reminding us the relevant views of Rufus of Ephesus.

Apart from this indirect source we must also stand in another reference in the work of this Byzantine physician who saves a relevant view of Galen. In this, he first discusses the beneficial properties of intercourse when treating mania or melancholia, a fact

that shows how Rufus of Ephesus influenced Galen. It is also contained that sexual activity is beneficial in mania and melancholia, making a person more logical, while in a person in love it diminishes the excessive urge and passion, when the person has intercourse with a partner (Oribasius Med. *Collectiones medicae* 24.1.1–24.2.1).¹⁶

Conclusion

Sexual activity in ancient Greece was an act to preserve the balance between health and disease. Body and mind could have been afflicted in the case of absence or excess of intercourse. Since the era of Hippocrates and later on, in the works of a series of well-known physicians, sex was tightly connected to the theory of the four humours.

Ψυχική υγεία και σεξουαλική δραστηριότητα σύμφωνα με τους αρχαίους Έλληνες ιατρούς

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Οι αρχαίοι Έλληνες ιατροί δεν παρέλειψαν στις μελέτες τους να υποδείξουν τον ευεργετικό ρόλο της σεξουαλικής δραστηριότητας στην υγεία του ανθρώπου. Αναγνώρισαν ότι οι σεξουαλικές σχέσεις βοηθούν στη διατήρηση της ψυχικής ισορροπίας του ανθρώπου. Μάλιστα ενδιαφέρον έχει η παρατήρησή τους ότι η σεξουαλική επαφή μπορεί να βοηθήσουν ψυχικά ασθενείς να αναρρώσουν. Όμως τόνιζαν εμφατικά ότι η σεξουαλική ζωή είναι ευεργετική μόνο όταν υπάρχει μέτρο σε αυτήν, γι' αυτό και υπογράμμιζαν ιδιαιτέρως ότι η σεξουαλική αποχή ή η υπερβολική σεξουαλική δραστηριότητα επιβαρύνουν αρνητικά την ψυχική, αλλά και τη σωματική υγεία του ανθρώπου. Στο συμπέρασμα αυτό κατέληξαν από την εμπειρική τους παρατήρηση. Προσπάθησαν να αιτιολογήσουν την ψυχική ανισορροπία, όπως και τα πιθανά σωματικά προβλήματα, τα οποία μάλλον σήμερα θα κατατάσσαμε στις ψυχοσωματικές εκδηλώσεις, των ανθρώπων με μακροχρόνια σεξουαλική αποχή ή υπερδραστηριότητα, με βάση τη θεωρία των χυμών που ήταν το κύριο μεθοδολογικό εργαλείο της αρχαίας ελληνικής ιατρικής. Έκριναν, δηλαδή, ότι η απώλεια και η ανταλλαγή σωματικών υγρών κατά τη σεξουαλική επαφή βοηθά στη διατήρηση της ισορροπίας των χυμών του σώματος, η οποία με τη σειρά της θα αποτελέσει τη βάση για τη σωματική και ψυχική υγεία. Αν και στα αρχαία ιατρικά κείμενα δεν αποδίδεται ο παραλογισμός που παρουσία-

ζαν οι άνθρωποι στις προαναφερθείσες συνθήκες σε κάποια από τις κύριες ψυχικές νόσους που αναγνωρίζονταν στην αρχαιότητα, δηλαδή μανία, μελαγχολία και φρενίτιδα, θα κρίναμε ότι η συμπεριφορά τους ταιριάζει περισσότερο στα χαρακτηριστικά της μελαγχολίας, ενώ σύμφωνα με τη σύγχρονη ιατρική αυτή θα πρέπει να κατατάσσεται στη νόσο της κατάθλιψης. Στο συμπέρασμα αυτό μπορούμε να οδηγηθούμε, γιατί κοινά γνωρίσματα των ανθρώπων που είτε δεν είχαν σεξουαλική ζωή ή ήταν υπερδραστήριοι, ήταν η αθυμία, η απουσία ενδιαφερόντων και ελπίδας, όπως και η παράλογη σκέψη που μπορεί να φτάσει μέχρι και την αυτοχειρία. Τα ψυχοσωματικά προβλήματα που ήταν δυνατό να εμφανιστούν σε αυτούς τους ανθρώπους, σύμφωνα με τους αρχαίους Έλληνες ιατρούς ήταν τα παρακάτω: συνεχείς πονοκεφάλι, αίσθημα βάρους, δυσκινησία του σώματος, πόνος, δυσουρία, πυρετός. Όλα αυτά τα συμπτώματα όμως εξαφανίζονται όταν ο άνθρωπος αποκτήσει με μέτρο σεξουαλική δραστηριότητα, όπως υποστηρίζει ο Γαληνός. Είναι εντυπωσιακό ότι αυτές οι ιδέες διατηρήθηκαν διαχρονικά ξεκινώντας ήδη από τους συγγραφείς της Ιπποκρατικής Συλλογής, από την οποία θα ξεχωρίσουμε το έργο Περί Παρθενίων, στο οποίο μάλιστα γίνεται αναφορά σε γυναίκες που έφταναν ακόμη και σε αυτοκτονία, απαγχονιζόμενες ή πέφτοντας σε πηγάδια, εξαιτίας της απουσίας σεξουαλικής ζωής. Ανάλογες αναφορές γίνονται ακόμη στα έργα του Ρούφου του Εφεσίου, του Σωρανού του Εφεσίου και του Γαληνού.

Λέξεις ευρετηρίου: Σεξουαλική ζωή, κατάθλιψη, μελαγχολία, φρενίτιδα, αρχαία ελληνική ιατρική.

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