

Hippocratic Drugs: Types of Medicines in the Hippocratic Corpus

Maria Mironidou-Tzouveleki¹, Konstantinos Kalousis¹, Eleni Christopoulou-Aletra²

1. Department of Pharmacology, 2. History of Medicine, Medical School, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

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The use of drugs to influence the functions of the human body is believed to be known since the early beginning of the human presence on earth. Many works of ancient Greek literature include references to medicinal use of substances found in nature.

The ancient Greek word *φάρμακον* (*farmakon*: drug), the root of the contemporary international world *Pharmacology*, had in the antiquity a double meaning. Galen defines as *φάρμακον* every substance that may alter the human nature (*Φάρμακον μὲν δὴ παν ὅ,τι περὶ ἀλλοιωτικόν ἢ τῆς φύσεως ἡμῶν*). Thus, the ancient term included the meaning of healing, as well as poisoning. In the Hippocratic texts the word is used as a synonym of *κάθαρσις* (*katharsis*: catharsis, purifying, cleaning). Drugs are divided in the Hippocratic treatises in various categories, according to the way of their use or to their specific action.

According to the way of their use, drugs are categorized as:

1. *Ποτήματα* (*potimata*): meaning drugs which can be drunk (1);
2. *Καταπότια* (*katapotia*): little pills (2);
3. *Βάλανοι* (*balani*=acorns): This term was used to describe the suppositories, due to their acorn-like shape (3);
4. *Ἐμπλάστα* (*emplasta*=plasters) (4);
5. *Καταπλαστά* (*kataplasta*: cataplasms): Hippocrates recommends the use of different cataplasms, in order to provide either heating or cooling effects (5);
6. *Μαλθακτήρια* (*malthaktiria*): meaning drugs for softening the skin;
7. *Αλοιφές* (*alifes*=ointments): made of animal marrow or fat;
8. *Χρίσματα* (*chrismata*): drugs used for smearing.

According to their action drugs are divided in:

1. *Επαναχρεμπτήρια* (*epanachremptiria*: expectorants);

2. *Εμετήρια* – *εμετικά* (*emetiria-emetika*: emetics): drugs with vomiting effects;

3. *Ἐναιμα* (*enema*): drugs with drying effects, used in the treatment of bleeding injuries of the joints or in similar cases;

4. *Ουραγωγικά* (*uragogika*=diuretics);

5. *Οδυνήφατα* (*odynifata*): pain (*odynē*) relieving drugs;

6. *Οφθαλμικά* (*ophthalmika*): drugs for the eyes;

7. *Στρυφνά* (*strifna*=astringents);

8. *Χοληγωγά* (*chologoga*): drugs which provoke the secretion of bile;

9. *Υστερικά* (*ysterika*=hysterics);

10. *Ατόκια* (*atokia*): medicines that prevent pregnancy, contraceptives;

11. *Εκβόλια* – *φθόρια* (*ekvolia – fthoria*): drugs to promote decaying (*fthora*) of the fetus and abortion (*ekvoli*);

12. *Ευτόκια* – *εγκυητήρια* (*eftokia – egkyitiria*): drugs which influence gestation in a positive way;

13. *Ισχυνήρια* (*ischyntiria*): drugs that contribute to the strengthening of the human organism;

14. *Ισπάντα* (*istanta*=retentives);

15. *Διαχωρητικά* (*diachoritika*): this group includes drugs that affect the gastrointestinal tract, such as laxatives;

16. *Ασηπτικά* (*asiptika*): drugs inhibiting sepsis (*sipsis*) or putrefaction. Most of them were powders, which were applied directly on wounds or ulcers;

17. *Θερμαντήρια* (*thermantiria*): drugs that increase body temperature;

1. *Ψυκτήρια* (*psyktiria*): drugs with cooling effects, when drunk;

19. *Ψύγματα* (*psygmata*): cooling compresses;

20. *Κακώδη* (*kakodi*: cacodes): in the *Corpus* are recommended reeking of the vagina with stinking drugs as a therapy for the diseases of the uterus;

21. *Καθαίροντα* – *υπήλατα* (*katheronta – ypilita*): medicines which provoke *katharsis* (purgation).

These were used not only for the gastrointestinal system (stomach, intestines), but also for the uterus, or through the nose and pharynx for the sake of the *purification* of the head (4).

The medicaments, according to the *Hippocratic Corpus* induce, after their uptake by the human organism, changes and more specifically restore the balance of the four humours (blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile). The administration of drugs should be done *in accordance with one's own nature* (*κατά φύσιν εκάστοισιν*) (7), meaning that the doctor should consider the personal characteristics of each patient. Every doctor should not only be aware of the nature of each drug (origin, quantity and quality, pharmacological action, indications and contraindications), but also take into account the *crasis* (the constitution) of his patients, their age, their body strength and the time of year, since the human health is extremely influenced by the meteorological occurrences and the very specific environment (8).

Though the treatise that was considered to be the Hippocratic Pharmacology, referred in the Hippocratic texts as *Pharmakitida*, has been lost, there are numerous references of it in almost all the books and especially the ones concerning Internal Medicine and Gynaecology. It is characteristic that

the majority of the substances used in the pharmaceutical preparations concern plants; few are of animal origin and some of mineral one. The main principle, however, for the administration of any treating substance of any form and composition is that the physician should dry whatever is moist in the organism or moisten its dry parts. Finally one should not forget that *when nature causes a disease, the nature herself treats it* meaning that the human organism can react, without any administration of drugs for the restoration of its health (9).

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