Hippocrates c. 460 B.C.-377 B.C.

The ancient Greeks believed that their most important arts had come to them from benevolent deities. Fire had been the gift of the titan Prometheus, medicine of the demigod Asclepius. But the Greeks were also very good at developing these arts in elaborately practical ways and they were eager to praise the mortals who had discovered the systems which connected them. Even during his life, they began to crown Hippocrates the “Father of Medicine.”

Born on Cos, an island sacred to Asclepius, Hippocrates probably learned the rudiments of medicine from his father, who had probably learned them from his father. But he left his home, where medicine was still intimately connected with the priesthood, in his early manhood and travelled and studied widely on the Greek mainland, islands and Asia Minor. As he began to treat patients himself, the scientific methods he developed won an enthusiastic following. The Corpus Hippocraticum (Works of Hippocrates), which contain the clinical observations and theoretical deductions he and his students recorded, formed the basis of Western scientific medicine.

Since Greek religion forbade the dissection of human bodies, Hippocrates’ knowledge of anatomy was sketchy and often inaccurate. But he more than made up for this lack by his meticulous observation of the progress of diseases among his patients. He took into account the past medical history of both his patients and their families and scrupulously recorded both his successes and failures in treating their ailments. He insisted that his students follow the same “clinical” procedure, learning their art by day-to-day practice rather than repeating the ancient techniques of the priestly physicians.

His concern for the development of diseases in individuals led Hippocrates and his followers to study the progress of epidemics among larger groups and then to investigate the principles of public hygiene. The treatise On Airs, Waters and Places was the first systematic attempt to connect human health with environmental conditions.

Though he was revered throughout classical times, Hippocrates’ influence all but died out during the European Dark Ages. By the time the writings of his school came back into circulation during the Renaissance, new discoveries—especially in anatomy—had made many of his conclusions obsolete. But the standards of medical practice he had first established now became the goal of all aspiring physicians and the “Hippocratic Oath,” a fervent declaration of the physician’s duty to tend and heal his patients, became the final requirement of graduating medical students.