

The rod of Asclepius

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THE ROD OF ASCLEPIUS (Box 1) remains one of the most widely used symbols of medicine. However, an unfortunate similarity to another symbol, the caduceus, has meant that in recent years its historical relevance has been diminished.

Within the Australian Defence Force, discussions are presently being held concerning the common designation of health specialists through the use of a symbol, and the rod of Asclepius certainly represents a suitable offering for this role. It is therefore an opportune time to recount the history of the rod of Asclepius, in order to better appreciate the significance that it holds for the health services.

Asclepius

The Greek god Apollo (son of Zeus and god of music, light and archery) was passionately in love with a mortal woman, Coronis, who had an affair with a young man while pregnant with Apollo's child. Apollo learnt of the affair from a raven and was taken with such rage that he ordered both the young man and Coronis to be killed. As Coronis burned on her funeral pyre, Apollo tore the unborn child (Asclepius) from her womb and entrusted the infant's care to a noble centaur named Chiron.¹

In Greek mythology, most centaurs were notorious drinkers and generally known as uncultured delinquents and carousers. Chiron, however, was cast from a different lineage, and was highly revered as a healer, teacher and medical tutor.¹ He was universally recognised as superlative among his peers, and was said to have tutored many prominent Greek figures (including Achilles and Theseus) in the art of healing. Chiron eventually died after surrendering his immortality to save another, and was cast to the skies as the constellation Sagittarius. However, Asclepius went on to expand his medical prowess, and is even said to have gained the power to restore the dead back to life using the blood from Medusa's right vein or by using a powerful herb provided by a magical serpent.²



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Abstract

- ◆ The rod of Asclepius is one of the most widely used symbols of medicine, but its similarity to another symbol, the caduceus, has resulted in its historical relevance being diminished in recent years.
- ◆ Asclepius was a physician with great healing powers, while the caduceus represents the staff of Hermes, a messenger of Zeus.
- ◆ In 1902, a Captain in the United States Army Medical Corps appears to have mistaken the caduceus for the rod of Asclepius, resulting in the adoption of the caduceus as the Corps' symbol.
- ◆ Asclepius' legacy to healing is significant, and if it is determined that clinical personnel within the Australian Defence Force Health Service should display a symbol representative of their specialist position, the rod of Asclepius certainly has a claim on this task.

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Asclepius' extraordinary healing powers were to prove his eventual undoing, for Hades became angry at the prospect of losing future Underworld inhabitants as a result of Asclepius' interventions. An irate Hades complained to Zeus, who agreed that mortals should be allowed to follow their destiny to its ultimate end. Zeus was also disappointed with Asclepius for accepting money in return for healing people, which he felt was a misuse of Asclepius' exceptional knowledge. Zeus obtained a thunderbolt fashioned by the Cyclopes, and used this weapon to strike Asclepius dead.²

Apollo was devastated by the loss of his son, and killed the Cyclopes for forging the thunderbolt. Zeus eventually accepted that Asclepius had provided a great service to mankind, and returned him from Hades after elevating him to the level of a god. Asclepius was therein transformed into the constellation Ophiuchus (the serpent-bearer),¹ and he lives on as the plant serpen-taria.²

Asclepieion temples became centres for healing around 300BC.³ Pilgrims would travel from far and wide to be healed at these temples,

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participating in a number of rituals (predominantly psychosomatic-based) aimed at gaining the favour of Asclepius. While in the asclepieion, the patient would usually spend a single night in a dormitory (a period of time known as the “incubation”), surrounded by non-venomous snakes thought to induce dreams that would reveal the required treatment regime. In the morning, priests and healers would then interpret the dreams and recommend a suitable remedy. Hippocrates himself is said to have commenced his training in one such asclepieion,³ and some believe that Hippocrates is in fact a direct descendant of Asclepius.¹

The caduceus

The rod of Asclepius has a genuine claim as the true symbol of medicine, but its similarity with the caduceus (a rod entwined with two serpents and surmounted with wings; Box 2) certainly generates confusion.

The caduceus is based on the staff of Hermes, who was a prominent — albeit scheming — messenger of Zeus. Among other titles, Hermes was the god of thieves, merchants and commerce,⁵ suggesting that the caduceus perhaps offers a less noble (if not ironic) symbol of medicine when compared with the rod of Asclepius.

Unfortunately, in 1902 a Captain in the United States Army Medical Corps appears to have mistaken the caduceus for the rod of Asclepius, proposing that the caduceus be adopted as the Corps’ symbol.⁴ The US Army’s then Surgeon General apparently happily agreed to this erroneous proposal, and the caduceus was subsequently adopted (Box 2). The error was eventually noticed by the Surgeon General’s librarian, but as

2 The caduceus and its use in the United States Army Medical Corps plaque⁴



several years had passed since its approval, the symbol was permitted to remain.

Adding to the prominence of the caduceus in medical literature was Swiss printer Johann Frobenius (1460–1527), who used it as a printer’s mark in a line of medical textbooks.⁴ However, in this instance, the caduceus was not used to represent the art of healing, but rather to acknowledge Hermes’ role as a messenger and to represent the biblical verse Matthew 10:16, “be ye therefore wise as serpents [the snakes], and harmless as doves [the wings]”.⁴

Perhaps the true relationship between the caduceus and the rod of Asclepius can best be demonstrated by the artwork of Aubin Louis Millin (Box 3), where Asclepius can be seen casting a disapproving stare at Hermes and a merchant while protecting his daughters, Meditrina (symbol of medicine), Hygieia (symbol of hygiene) and Panacea (symbol of all healing). Both the caduceus and the rod of Asclepius are plainly visible, demonstrating clearly that they are separate entities.

This picture has additional meaning for those in the medical profession, for Asclepius, Hygieia and Panacea all feature prominently in the Hippocratic Oath.

Conclusion

In mythological terms, Asclepius’ legacy to healing is significant, and his tale continues to resonate today. While the prominence of the rod of Asclepius as a symbol of medicine may have diminished somewhat in recent years, its historical prominence remains unassailable.

If it is determined that clinical personnel within ADF Health Service should display a symbol representative of their specialist position, the rod of Asclepius certainly has a claim on this task.

Competing interests

None identified.

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3 Aubin Louis Millin’s engraving of Hermes and a merchant approaching a disapproving Asclepius and his daughters



From *Galerie Mythologique, Recueil de Monuments* by Aubin Louis Millin, Paris, 1811. Engraved from an original in the then Museum Pio Clemens in Rome. Source: <http://www.drblayney.com/Asclepius.html>.