



Ancient Art — Precious Science

Academy's 1600 B.C. Egyptian Papyrus at Metropolitan Museum This Fall

NEW YORK CITY, August 12, 2005 — The oldest extant surgical treatise—the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus—makes a rare public appearance as the highlight of the Metropolitan Museum's new exhibition, *The Art of Medicine in Ancient Egypt*, September 13, 2005–January 15, 2006. On loan from The New York Academy of Medicine, the document is presented in eleven hieroglyphic panels (spanning 15 feet) that reveal an ancient wisdom almost 3,000 years old.

“This treasure of ancient medicine—and others like it—are important not as curiosities, but as living testaments to the fact that we can and must learn from the past. Medicine and surgery are based on precedent, on what has been observed and practiced,” commented Dr. Jeremiah Barondess, President of The New York Academy of Medicine. “Although the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus is the gem of our collection, we hold many historically important texts that are relevant to contemporary doctors, scholars, and scientists.”



The extant portions of the surgical papyrus reveal the author's profound scientific knowledge as he describes treatments for head and thoracic injuries. His approach is rational and full of keen scientific insight. Throughout the document, the author's grasp of anatomy, the circulatory system, and neurology emerge with clarity and precision. In fact, they bear striking similarities to 21st century medicine. For example, the surgical papyrus contains the first known descriptions of the cranial sutures, the meninges, the external surface of the brain, cerebrospinal fluid, and intracranial pulsations.

Atypically, the author turns to magic in only one case out of those preserved. Even then, he calls on spells that are practical and touchingly human: invocations against pestilence and in favor of charming old age back to youth.

The New York Academy of Medicine collections also include such rare and fascinating volumes as: William Harvey's 1628 *De motu cordis*, in which Harvey described the circulation of the blood; Apicius's *De re culinaria*, a 9th century manuscript of an early Roman cookbook (one of only two surviving copies—the other is at the Vatican); and an early fifteenth-century manuscript that is an English translation of Guy de Chauliac's 1363 surgical treatise, *Chirurgia Magna*. These, and thousands of other books, journals, letters, and manuscripts, chronicle the intriguing—and sometimes frustrating—development of medicine since earliest times.

As a complement to the Metropolitan Museum's exhibition, The New York Academy of Medicine is hosting a series of four lectures on *Medicine before Modernity*, which begins on September 27, 2005. On that date, The Academy will also open *Holes in the Head: Mending Injuries from Pericles to Bonaparte*, a special exhibition. Details will follow shortly under separate cover.

The New York Academy of Medicine, the country's premier urban health policy and intervention center, focuses on enhancing the health of people living in cities through research, education, advocacy, and prevention. Visit us online at www.nyam.org.

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Editors: Interviews with Academy experts are available by appointment. Jpg images of the Edwin Smith Surgical Papyrus are available upon request. Contact Maria Dering at (212) 873-6715.

Posted on 08/19/2005

Contact:

Kathryn Cervino

Associate Director of Communications

212.822.7285

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