
Aulus Cornelius Celsus – a famous Roman encyclopedist

Aulus Cornelis Celsus – sławny rzymski encyklopedysta

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Abstract

The ancient Romans did not work as physicians, but they used the services of foreign doctors, mostly Greeks. During the times of the Roman Empire there emerged a class of well-educated patricians, who possessed knowledge in various field. Aulus Cornelius Celsus, the author of a voluminous work, was one of such patricians. Of the numerous volumes of his encyclopaedia only a fragment on medicine is extant. The piece which remains intact is a collection of medical knowledge of those times.

Keywords: Aulus Cornelius Celsus, Roman encyclopaedist, medicine in Antiquity

The art of healing in ancient Rome was the domain of the Greeks. It was connected with the morals of free citizens who considered the gainful employment of a doctor not compatible with their social status. The Romans, as a pragmatic nation, appreciated the therapeutic activities of physicians, but they saw themselves only as politicians, lawyers, legislators, soldiers and leaders. Educated Roman patricians were interested in science, also achievements in the field of disease treatment, but their inquisitiveness in this field was compilation-encyclopedic. The best proof of this is Celsus' work entitled: *De medicina libri octo*, which was originally one of the parts of a multi-volume work on military, agriculture, rhetoric, law, philosophy and medicine.

The volume devoted to medicine, which is a wide collection of medical knowledge available in Rome during the reign of the first emperors, suggests that the author used the content of many contemporary studies and the help of specialists. The book was probably written during the reign of Emperor Tiberius, in the years 30–35 AD. Celsus was a talented author, so his undoubted achievement is the style of Latin text and the clarity and accuracy of a widely documented account. The book *De medicina libri octo* was the first medical treatise written in Latin and using Latin medical terminology [1].

The author, Aulus Cornelius Celsus, came from a wealthy Roman family of Cornelius. His life and activity, which happened in the first century after Christ, remains a mystery. It is believed that he was not a doctor, although the precision with which he presented various medical treatment techniques entitles to make opposing suspicions. In his work, in only one sentence he mentioned direct contact with patients: *I wait until late at night*, he wrote, *to feed the feverish patient* [2].

In the discussed work, medical knowledge was divided into three parts: a part devoted to diseases cured by means of diet; diseases cured with medicine; diseases in which surgical intervention was necessary. The aforementioned structure of the treaty shows the didactic intentions of the author, which were manifested in the form of accessible descriptions of individual diseases and their treatment. So-called general diseases he differentiated very carefully, at the same time giving the organ of their location; under the concept of general diseases he understood ailments affecting the whole organism. He included fever, mental disorders, coma, epilepsy, tuberculosis, ascites, jaundice, apoplexy and leprosy as diseases of this group.

In his teaching, Celsus was an eclectic and did not follow the views of any medical school. In the introduction to *De medicina libri octo* he expressed the opinion that dogmatists and empiricists, so two groups of medics representing different schools, are similar in practice, although the first claimed that proper care and therapy of patients should be based on both knowledge of anatomy, and the causes of the disease, while others denied the need to determine pathogens, considering that *anatomy and all physiological and pathological ideas as superfluous*. However, both schools used similar drugs to implement traditional prescriptions. Celsus was of the opinion that each case should be approached individually; he advised to combine theory and practice.

The part of the treatise devoted to symptomatology is very modest, sometimes laconic and resembles texts from the writings of Hippocrates, e.g. *Epilepsy is one of the most well-known diseases. The patient suddenly falls, foam occurs on his lips. After the attack ends, the patient the patient regains conscious-*

ness and gets up on its own after some time. Epilepsy is often accompanied by convulsions, but not always. Or a description of cholera: *The patient is severely vomiting and suffers from diarrhoea, besides he has flatulence and abdominal pain. Initially, the bile secretion looks like water, then it resembles rinses after fresh meat; sometimes it's white, sometimes black, then different colour. Due to this excretion, the bile Greeks called the disease cholera (...)* The sick person is suffering because of thirst, and finally loses consciousness. If these symptoms occur simultaneously, their consequence is death.

Many of Celsus's statements are aphorisms, also in the Hippocratic style. For example, *Hard liver is a bad symptom with jaundice or Intestinal obstruction leads to the patient's death within seven days if he does not subside within that time* [3].

In ancient times, fever was considered an individual disease entity. Celsus very sporadically mentioned feverish diseases: "There are many types of fever: one-day, three-day, four-day." It was recommended to cure exhaustion, which in ancient times was known under three forms (atrophy, cachexia, tuberculosis) through climate change. In the case of ascites, Celsus advocated careful measurement of fluid intake and urination, in order to compare the volume of both fluids and make a prediction.

In the field of personal hygiene, he recommended baths, gym exercises, appropriate food and liquids. He attached great importance to the diet, which finding (for each patient individually) was the physician's most important task. He divided the food into three categories: strong, medium and weak, depending on the value of the meal consumed. According to Celsus, serving specific foods should take into account the patient's digestive abilities.

During the Roman encyclopedist general treatment was used for many diseases. The most common method was bloodletting, which were first used in Alexandria. Celsus recommended bloodletting for various ailments: fever, inflammation and even bloody strokes. He also described the treatment using so-called bubbles, which were placed on patients using horn or bronze products, variable compresses, hot iron or mineral substances, laxative therapy, suppositories with various effects, hot compresses, diaphoretic treatments, steam baths. In case of drowsiness or lethargy, he advised the use of cool water, which should have been poured on the patient's head. To strengthen the above treatment, he recommended agents that cause sneezing [4]. Patients in a state of exhaustion or asthenia, and also with a fever, he recommended shaking the Asklepiades method, who performed this procedure using a bed set in motion. For people suffering from paralysis, he advised to irritate the nettle affected parts of the body. Patients with digestive disorders should... read aloud, while mentally ill people listen to music. Thermal medicine was supposed to be a cure for chronic diseases.

Many medications were mentioned in the work of Celsus, although much less than in the works of other encyclopedists: Pliny the Elder and Dioskurides. The author of *De medicina*

libri octo proposed the use of various substances, thus wanting to check their healing effects. In relation to other recommended drugs, he was guided by the belief in their therapeutic properties. In his work he mentioned, among others 24 diuretics and herbs, such as black root of hellebore used at that time for depression, as well as the light root of this plant, which allegedly alleviated euphoric states [5]. Some of the medications presented by Celsus had magical significance, while others can be described as irrational, confusing, and even repulsive, among others deer bone marrow, ground snails, boiled earthworms and gladiator blood recommended for epileptics [6].

The work entitled *De medicina libri octo* contained very scanty information in the field of anatomy. Celsus sketched the location of organs and bones of the skeleton, trying to locate the disease. He attributed great importance to the diaphragm, or, as he said, a "strongly nervous membrane" separating the heart and other "noble" chest organs from the abdominal organs, mainly the liver and intestines. The diaphragm and the brain – in his opinion – competed with each other in terms of their functions, and the consequence of the competition of organs was the madness in many people.

The most significant field of medicine described by Celsus was surgery, which he presented in books V to VIII. Chapters of Book V cited in Władysław Szumowski's textbooks perfectly illustrate the scope of activities of the then physicians performing surgeries to treat fractures and dislocations of bones [7]. The Roman encyclopedist also described other procedures, e.g. urinary stone removal surgery, skull trepanation, abdominal puncture, umbilical hernia surgery, cataract surgery, limb amputation, fistula closure. To stop bleeding, he recommended tamponades, compresses, cautions and arterial ligation. He proposed to treat wounds with vinegar, wine or water dressings.

Not a practicing medic, Celsus was not an authority in the environment contemporaries physicians. He was also not quoted in their treatises. Only Pliny the Elder, also a great Roman encyclopedist, called Celsus an *Auctor* in his works. Celsus gained popularity only during the Renaissance. At that time, *De medicina libri octo* was printed in 1478, before the writings of Hippocrates and Galen. Since then, Celsus's work has been published and translated many times. The rank of the literary output of a Roman encyclopedist is evidenced by the nicknames given to him: Hippokrates latinus and Cicero medicus [8].

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Streszczenie

Rzymianie nie parali się pracą lekarza, ale korzystali z usług medyków – cudzoziemców, głównie Greków. W okresie cesarstwa pojawili się wykształceni patrycjusze, którzy posiadli wiedzę z różnych dziedzin. Jednym z nich był Aulus Korneliusz Celsus, autor obszernego dzieła. Zachował się jego fragment poświęcony medycynie, będący zbiorem wiedzy lekarskiej tamtych czasów.

Słowa kluczowe: Aulus Korneliusz Celsus, rzymscy encyklopedyści, medycyna w starożytności
