

Modern Asclepieions

A World-Wide Movement To Provide Modern Health And Culture Parks For The New Millennium

Ancient Beliefs And The Asclepieions

To be healthy has always been regarded as being of the greatest importance and advantage when considering quality of life. The ancient societies understood this, and placed great emphasis on achieving and maintaining physical fitness as well as on promoting the general well being of the whole person. They provided philosophies that viewed man in his wholeness and their concepts and notions were often given weight by being incorporated in the myths and the legends of the time. Stories of great physical feats and 'worthy champions' were provided to give examples and role models for the population to respect and to emulate. Healthcare itself however remained relatively primitive until the recent era of scientific discovery.

Before the philosophical enlightenment that occurred with Christianity and with current evolutionary science, mankind also sought answers to life's enigmas through the creation of a plurality of gods or through the Old Testament writings of the 'One God'. They ascribed to these deities the power and the will to provide for human needs and to cause or to alleviate their sufferings. In this context the faithful were encouraged to be worshippers whilst their god became their champion and their mentor, who required allegiance by providing a set of rules or actions for the faithful to follow.

The modern world's ethos is not too dissimilar to these two ancient approaches, although the philosophies concerning the origins of disease and the means of satisfying man's needs have changed. Scientific medicine has explained many 'causes' and provided many 'cures', whilst human institutions have taken up the roles of authority and persuader. International bodies, National, Regional and Local Governments, (with their Members of Parliaments, City Councillors and Mayors), as well as the Health and Education Authorities are now the ones who provide for the well being of those who elected or appointed them. Their policies determine the shape and the quality of all our lives. Laws are passed to safeguard our health and the environment. Healthcare and social systems are established to deliver services. The individual is encouraged to take up health maintenance, life-long learning and socio-cultural pursuits, whilst sports and other personalities still provide examples and role models.

The Ancient Asclepieions' Health And Culture Movement

In the 5th century BC the ancients of the Greek world created a myth that declared allegiance to the god *Asclepios* [1,2,3] and through him they began a new health and culture movement which provided a holistic view of man in the context of his total environment. These ancients made *Asclepios* their champion and described him as the offspring of the god *Apollo* and the mortal *Koronis*. This was a combination that provided the necessary divine power for healing and the human empathy that was appropriate to their time and to their view of man and his health, including his frailties, illnesses and death. They also elevated *Asclepios* to the status of a full deity (in spite of his part human parentage) and the myth depicts him as rising from the inferno to be a true 'healing god' for all mankind.

The *Asclepieion* movement reached its height in the 4th century BC and never lost its human appeal until the end of the ancient world and the rise of Christianity in the 1st. and the 2nd centuries AD. Practically no Greek city was without its own *Asclepios* temple and the faithful

built their worshipping and healing centres, as well as their sanctuaries, throughout the ancient world. The most renowned of these were at Trikki, Epidaure, Titani, Athens, Kos island, Lissos, Levin and Kyrene. The temples of *Asclepios* were located in parklands or groves so that a clean and tranquil environment could be ensured for those pursuing their health needs. These Asclepieion centres, provided the healthcare sites of their day, where cures were achieved by psychologically strengthening the patient and his faith in the healing capabilities of *Asclepios* (reassurance, relaxation, suggestion, miracle), and by application of the then known pharmaceutical treatments and the pursuit of a healthy way of living (herbal remedies, exercise, diet and other holistic treatments).

Usually both of these methods were practised in a combined form to be mutually complementary. The miraculous epiphany (appearance) of *Asclepios* was another way of achieving healing and this took place during the patients' sleep, inside the "sacra-sanctum" space of the temple. This latter form of healing much resembles the modern use of hypnosis and faith healing.

The faithful worshipped in the temples of *Asclepios* and in other surrounding sacred premises. These included certain buildings used for medical assistance and for specific treatments, similar to the infirmaries of today. Specially constructed hospitality, or guest, houses were also provided for the use and the sanctuary of itinerant pilgrims. There are still similar monastic houses used for respite in Greece and other countries today.

Apart from the healing ministries, other elements of worship (appreciation) and cultural pursuits were included in the overall system that was developed to care for man's health. These included the holy water for ritual cleanings as well as for bathing. There were also athletic contests as well as musical and theatrical performances, which were held in honour of *Asclepios* and were staged in stadiums and in theatres respectively. In this way the benefits of athleticism and the performing arts were brought to bear on the well being of the participants.

A Model For Today

The creators of the myth of *Asclepios* were far in advance of their time. They had demonstrated an approach to health and well-being, which included a means of healthcare delivery that had overcome the human factors concerned with acceptance. Their overall system provided for an holistic view of man in his natural environment and in his socio-cultural world, and their philosophy had many similarities with the Christian approach to man's needs but could not offer the same promise of complete relief from the curse of suffering and death. Their organisational and structural systems for healthcare delivery were however remarkable and they can provide today's world with many lessons as a model to follow.

The ancient *Asclepieions* made use of the entire up-to-date medical knowledge and the tried and tested healing methods that were available at the time, just as we would. They also combined this 'science' with all the elements of an holistic approach and in this way they utilised de-facto the elements of trust building, social interaction and outdoor activities as well as health maintenance, education and appreciation (worship), to achieve their goals.

Today's Societal Structures And The Awakening Of Modern Asclepieions

In the scientific world of today, the focus of healthcare delivery has shifted from the ancients' emphasis on 'health' to the modern preoccupation with 'sickness'. Our cities and institutions reflect this change in their design and in their organisation of services.

There are now separate establishments to support medical services, education and socio-cultural pursuits. There is even a separation in the sites and in the organisational systems that are directly involved in the delivery of healthcare itself, e.g. the primary and secondary care installations such as hospitals and local community healthcare centres, extending to social care

and to counselling agencies. These arrangements and their established systems have created both structural and conceptual boundaries that serve to separate the components of our healthcare systems as well as to cut them off from their traditional links with the natural environment, including the related socio-cultural and educational worlds. They provide an isolationist and competitive ethos rather than a synergistic environment in which to deliver services.

Today, there are no suitable societal structures (let alone establishments), which could cover the overall needs that are related to a holistic view of man and his well-being. There is therefore less emphasis on the quality of life and a greater concern with the quantity (or rationing) of the services that should be delivered. There is also a dependency on centralised hierarchies and economic models as the driving forces. The general well being, trust and empowerment of those seeking information and knowledge concerning their health and their health maintenance has been overlooked and there is currently a divisive force between the information rich and the information poor.

These modern societal structures and concepts are not in line with the principles promoted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) where 'health' is described as "the state of complete physical, mental and social well-being"¹. The WHO philosophical approach is much more closely aligned to that of those who created the myth of *Asclepius* and to that of the believers in the pre-scientific Christian era. It is now however becoming evident again that there is a need for balanced development and essential well being for every individual in society, and it is increasingly being recognised that modern lifestyles need the re-awakening of modern Asclepieions.

Most cities today have some open green spaces, where the concepts of an *Asclepieion park* could be established. Citizens of all ages could then enjoy an agreeable and inviting environment where the natural world, health and socio-cultural activities could be brought together. This approach would have a considerable positive impact on the health and well being of all our cities and on all city residents. The new developments taking place in the growth of the information society are now making it possible to achieve such cross sector activities and the cities of the future will need to provide both the environment and the services, which are directed toward a holistic view of needs.

The Modern Asclepieion Movement has the ambition to provide such facilities and to contribute decisively to the search for immediate and effective integrated solutions to complex and perplexing lifestyle stresses and to the organisational problems that are faced by modern societies. Economic forces are part of this endeavour and the business and industrial sectors will need to come together with the other stakeholders to create the new health movement of the future.

The Total Environment and the Modern Asclepieions

In ancient times healthcare was always associated with both the physical and the emotional well being of man as well as his social and educational environments. Today, the advent of medical science and new medical technologies has led to an emphasis on centralised services and on physical and biochemical illness, which promote a dependency on pharmaceutical and

¹ In modern times WHO has acknowledged the relevance of integrated approaches to enhance citizens' well-being by shaping policies and launching programmes. Directly relevant to the Modern Asclepieions concepts is the 'HEALTH21' policy directive for the 21st century. Among the 21 targets contained in the document 15 are directly relevant to the Modern Asclepieions concepts and strategy (HEALTH21 can be viewed electronically from <http://www.who.dk/cpa/h21/h21.htm>). Other programmes and projects related to the Modern Asclepieions are 'The Healthy Cities Project' (1988-2002 / <http://www.who.dk/healthy-cities/>) and the 'European Network of Health Promoting Schools' (1991-today / <http://www.who.dk/enhps/page/intenglish.html>).

operative cures that are based on proven knowledge and on specialised expertise. There has been a rejection of 'nature's healing power', and of human empathy both of which cannot readily be quantified or scientifically evaluated. There has also been a turning away from dealing with the whole person in the totality of his environmental, spiritual and socio-cultural contexts.

The nature of man has not however changed and the ancients recognised that an agreeable and healthy environment influences health and well-being through its effects on the physical as well as the mental and emotional state of individuals. Man needs a contact with the natural world even if its just his own garden, his household plants, or a companion pet, and many of the ancient ways to maintain a healthy lifestyle are now becoming more and more recognised as being beneficial to his well being. Man is also a worshipping creature, whether he places his trust in his carers, in the fates, in the gods, in the one God, in evolutionary science, in market forces, or in job/career prospects. Modern lifestyles place stresses on every aspect of bodily and mental function and the health promoting guidelines laid down by the ancient Asclepieions have much to say to present and future generations.

Despite the good progress that has been made in the modern world, in having food, shelter and sanitation as well as employment and entertainment, there are still large populations and segments of populations that live in very difficult circumstances. It is also not unusual to find environmental and social factors that adversely affect everyone, even those who live in developed societies, which are technologically advanced and affluent. "Time and chance happen to all men"² and disadvantage occurs in every society so that the totalities, which influence the quality of life, concern us all.

The ancient Greeks had the saying 'Νους υγιής εν σώματι υγιή', meaning "A Sane Mind in a Sane Body" (in Latin, 'Animus Sani in Corpus Sani'). Despite the WHO definition of Health, this wisdom of maintaining bodily and mental 'fitness' (wellness), has been lost in the way that societies have now become organised and in the way that our cities have been structured. There is a current neglect of the environmental promoters of well-being and the integrated services that can provide high quality health and wellness programmes as well as the enjoyment of the arts, entertainment and creative pursuits. The barriers of separation that have grown up between the different societal organisations and systems involved are now a major cause for concern.

Health maintenance (wellness) is a focus that can only be pursued in such a multiple and yet integrated service context. It should be addressed as part of the totality of elements that impinge on man's welfare and therefore as part of the overall facilities provided for all. It is significant that the ancients regarded our well being to be related to the activities of the sports, leisure and entertainment industries. The activities concerned are now well known to be good promoters of health and to be beneficial to maintaining both our bodily as well as our mental fitness. In this context it is not only the activities which are important. The buildings that are used for these purposes, and the access to them, are part of the city's environment, and the concept of beauty in both art and architecture and in the design of facilities are all important to our well-being. Such factors include the provision of pedestrian areas and walkways and of transport systems that reduce traffic density and air pollution.

The wisdom of the ancients has suggested a model whereby an agreeable and healthy environment, which best promotes bodily health and mental fitness, can be provided by combining the benefits of the natural world with the riches of well planned socio-cultural and health related facilities. In today's world, this model of the 'Asclepieion Parks' could be used to provide enjoyment of the natural environment and the architectural design of our cities. They could also combine these health promoters with the facilities to provide the high quality and effective services that keep us healthy and that treat our disorders, as well as engendering our 'trust' by being tailored to the wholeness of man and by being brought within the reach of everyone. Apart from health benefits these environmental features and holistic services play a

² Ecclesiastes Chapter 9, verse 11

vital role in developing our life quality. They also span the elements of city planning, education (information and knowledge) and appreciation (worship), all of which have an important part to play in the balanced development of the healthy society.

Modern Asclepieions would re-structure the green areas of our cities so that they act as meeting places, which are accessible to everyone and that combine all the facilities to provide for our health and welfare. In this way all individuals could be exposed to a holistic approach to the quality of their life and at the same time they could have access to integrated services that are without the structural and conceptual boundaries imposed by current societal systems. The new information and communications technologies (ICT's), make this possible and can support the provision of such services in the home for those with mobility problems but outside the home interaction should be encouraged to obtain the maximum 'wellness' benefit. Facilities for children, families, the elderly and the disabled are therefore needed.

Modern Asclepieion Parks And The New Scientific And Technological Innovations

The concept of Modern Asclepieion Parks is to design, as part of city planning, large enough green-areas where the natural world can be related to health and culture. These areas need to provide attractive facilities for all city residents and visitors so that they may have the opportunity to engage in activities which will promote health maintenance, life-long learning, social interaction and cultural pursuits. In today's world, such services can be most effectively supported by the new scientific and technological innovations of the developing information society. Suitable infrastructures will need to be built for the effective and efficient exploitation of the opportunities offered by these new technologies.

The developments in the telematic technologies, i.e. the combination of information and communication technologies (ICT's), are expected to provide new, powerful products, processes and services as solutions to the existing complex and chronic societal problems. As a result they will also facilitate the introduction of innovations in all the activities related to Environment, Health and Culture.

A number of cities in technologically advanced countries have already developed ICT applications and services in several key areas³. Many of them are focusing on information provision and education. Health and Arts appear as two sectors that will attract considerable interest in future years. The majority of the cities of the world have not however been decisively engaged in providing a digital environment for the new information era. The new millennium will see a generation of young people who will expect to use the new information and communications technologies as part of their normal everyday lives. Every effort therefore should be made to ensure the maximum benefit from integrated services that can improve the quality of life for all.

The expected results of such activities will have a very positive impact towards the materialisation of the vision of the developing Information Society, including equity of access

³ An example worth citing is InfoCities, a programme designed by the members of Telecities - an association of over one hundred European cities. The objective of InfoCities is to evaluate the application of information and communication technologies (ICT) to deliver integrated public services, moving towards a 'one-stop' point of service delivery. The service areas chosen for the feasibility phase were education, health, transport, culture, electronic commerce and public information. Information can be found in the Web Site <http://www.infocities.eu.int/>. Members of the network are the cities of Den Haag, Barcelona, Helsinki, Manchester, Nord Pas de Calais, Vienna.

to high quality services, participation of all residents to desired activities, and satisfactory provision of information and knowledge.

The planned use of the new information and communications technologies (ICT's) can make all this possible, and their implementation could translate the myth of *Asclepios* into a modern reality for all, irrespective of location and disadvantage.

The First Pilot Of A Modern Asclepieion Park

The notion of starting a 'Modern Asclepieion Movement' was conceived in 1994 in Athens⁴. Modern Asclepieion Parks represent a modern realisation of the ancient model, with the prospect on the one hand to cover the current needs of city residents in relation to health, environment and culture, and on the other hand to create new prototypes and installations suitable to serve present and future generations. Several issues relating to Modern Asclepieion Parks are innovative in city planning, environmental improvement and healthcare delivery, others are concerned with new services and business opportunities, and others represent new approaches that will hopefully lead to new solutions for integrated cross-sector activities that can benefit all. There exists therefore a vast array of issues and topics suitable for state of the art research and development initiatives.

The strategy to be followed required an initial research and development phase. One of the main pillars of this is to establish an interdisciplinary approach for problem solving. A second one is the need to establish a spectrum of possible 'core activities'. These efforts are indispensable in order to preserve the original concepts, the harmonisation of the proposed approaches and the designs of the basic ethical, deontological and aesthetic principles as well as conformance of implementation mechanisms and the services to the same basic principles. Specific areas that are considered and in which it is felt that activities need to be developed, are those of health maintenance, medicine, athleticism, culture, sociology, environment and education. The search for solutions, with the assistance of modern scientific and technological achievements and with the participation of the business and industrial communities, will constitute the fundamental characteristic of the research and the development strategy to be shaped.

The first pilot application of a Modern Asclepieion has been proposed to be a specific area within the urban structure of greater Athens, four kilometres from the Municipality of Athens historic and business centre.

Initial work has been already funded by Greek public authorities such as the Ministry of the Environment, Natural Planning and Public Works [4] and the General Secretariat of Research and Technology [5]. Promotional activities concerning the concept of Modern Asclepieions have been carried out by the "Friends of the Asclepieion Park of Athens" Association since 1997 with the creation and maintenance of the Web Site at <http://asclepieion.mpl.uoa.gr>.

The Web pages are a repository of all the activities related to the promotion of the research work undertaken or to be undertaken in the context of Modern Asclepieions. In addition the ease of accumulation of new proposals and ideas originating from scientists linked to the WWW, is expected to strengthen the Site, so as to become a reference repository and a starting point for all future activities.

⁴ The initiative was of Associate Professor Dimitrios Sotiriou of the School of Medicine of the University of Athens and of Thodoros Papadimitriou, sculptor and Professor of the Technical University of Athens. The realisation of a first Modern Asclepieion Park has been proposed as an endeavour for the greater Athens area. An association under the name 'Friends of the Asclepieion Park of Athens' was created on June 21, 1994.

On June 23 2003, the School of Medicine of the University of Athens decided to support the transformation of its campus area in Athens to a Modern Asclepieion. The programme has been called IASPIS and it is placing emphasis on the creation and operations of electronic Portals. The Portals are created using Microsoft's SharePoint Portal Server and are in the testing phase.

Discussion And Conclusions

The Athens initiative points towards a new approach for providing services to citizens.

Extensive R&D work is necessary to describe the basic specifications of the model of a Modern Asclepieion. This work is expected to result in a template or platform that can be the basis for the design of every modern Asclepeion, at any given environment and situation. Specific requirements reflecting the local conditions should be added.

Consultation with a large number of members of the scientific, cultural and technical societies in Greece suggests that the notions and concepts on which Modern Asclepieions are based are easily accepted and meet wide support. The same results are evident from consultations with a small number of personalities outside Greece. The seamless provision of integrated services of Health and Culture to citizens at any time, in one place, is a very important requirement and should be satisfied without any delay.

New ICT technologies can facilitate enormously the rapid development of Modern Asclepieions in an efficient and effective way. ICT services are not intended to replace completely the various services offered today by conventional means but rather to be complementary to them. It should also be born in mind that Modern Asclepeions are places of human and social interaction in contrast to the well-promoted approach of 'smart home' or 'smart work place'.

There is a great chance now that the goals set up by WHO and adopted by all countries can become a reality with reasonable and affordable effort.

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