

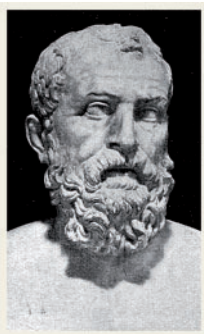
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Health care policy in Ancient Greece

Insights from the Golden Age of Athens (5th century BC) may be useful for medical care in the 21st century

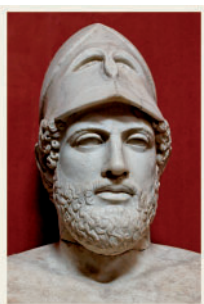
Health policy has been a major topic of political, social, financial, ethical, and philosophical debate worldwide. Several perspectives and expert opinions have been published in the scientific literature highlighting the different views on the ideal health care system for the 21st century. However, it is remarkable how old the roots of these humanitarian approaches for delivering health services to people living in organized communities are.

Humanity and nations have been dealing with healthcare policies and legislations since antiquity. The example of the Golden Age of Athens and Athenian Democracy, the first known democracy in the world, during the 5th century BC, remains the most enlightening. The main characteristics of that society were the equality under the law, the dignity of the individual, the tolerance, the mutual respect, and the public spirit. These principles had a tremendous timeless impact for the future establishment of societies and systems.



It all started in the 6th century BC when Solon (640-558 BC), the Athenian lawmaker with medical knowledge, influenced by the lawmaker Lycurgus of Sparta (800-730 BC) and by the work of Zaleucus (7th century BC) who devised the first Greek code of law, the Locrian Code, legislated and redesigned an innovative public health system emphasizing social welfare and medical care for all people living in Athens including citizens, residents, former slaves who were set free and slaves.

Solon succeeded to smoothen the social differences and to stabilize a new political and economic situation which contributed to the flourishing of the Athenian democracy. The State had to create conditions of providence and prosperity, capable to support its social structure and avoid its decline. The idea of social and health policy was further developed in ancient Athens as is reported in the original state-municipal laws.



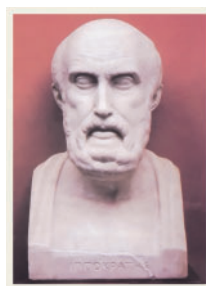
In the golden age of Pericles, healthcare services were provided by physicians who were permanently established in the city state as either public or private practitioners of medicine. The most famous among them could also be itinerant, travelling from city to city, invited and paid by the city state such as Democides of Croton who was practicing medicine as an itinerant during the last quarter of the 6th century BC.

Public physicians were elected by vote in the public church according to their qualifications, ethics and reputation amongst the citizens.

They could gain much respect from the citizens and this is reflected by stele, a stone monument erected in ancient Greece and inscriptions attributing honours to public doctors, as in the case of the physician Euenor (late 4th century) who was honoured by the Athenians with the title of benefactor, for both he and his descendants. Public physicians were paid by the state and they were obliged to visit and treat poor citizens for free. According to the writings of Libanius (314-393), until the 4th century AD several physicians were also financially supporting poor patients.



In 5th century BC, a special tax, on the income of temples of the healing god Asclepius, called 'medical', was given for the salary of public physicians and the maintenance of public dispensaries. On the contrary, private physicians were paid for every visit, surgery or treatment and their payment was one drachma (N.B. at the end of the fifth century, an ordinary craftsman was earning about 1 drachma per day). However, in several cases the amount of the payment was left to the discretion of the patient, whether he recovered or not.



Hippocrates (460-377) was advising physicians not to determine their payment in advance, (i.e. prior to consultation), as this could be detrimental for the patient if he/she was suffering from a serious illness and could not afford to pay the physician. Additionally, Greek physicians believed that their effectiveness in treating patients depended on *philanthropia* (philanthropy, the love of mankind) that in turn kindled in patients' *polytechnia* (love of the medical art). It was a two directional relationship based on trust and confidence.

Another notable feature of medical practice in ancient Greece was the presence of physicians at the great festivals and Games such as, Panathenaea Festival and Olympic Games, treating athletes and spectators gratis.

In the centuries that followed, the advent of technology in healthcare has completely reformed medical practice and new philosophical and ethical theories have emerged. A deeper analysis and understanding of the health policy plans and legislations during the Golden Age of Athens where democracy, humanism, justice, and philosophy were blooming, may provide a strong framework for the construction and establishment of modern strategies aiming for a successful regional healthcare system.

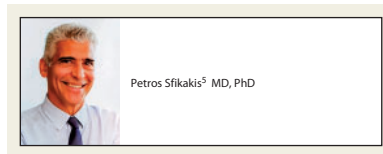
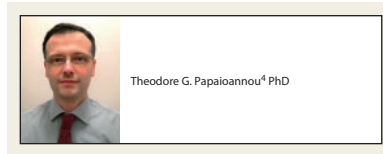
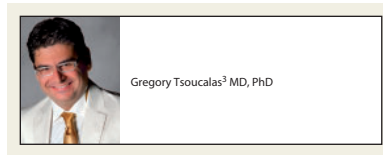
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References

References are available as supplementary material at *European Heart Journal* online.