

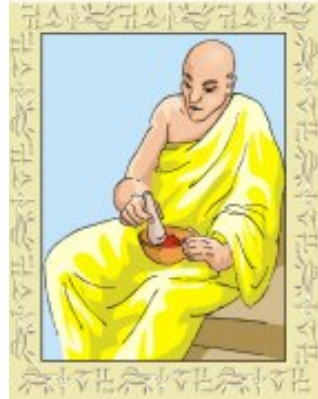
Name _____



Medicine in Mesopotamia

By Vickie Chao

In Greek, Mesopotamia (pronounced "mes-uh-puh-TAY-mee-uh") meant "the land between the rivers." Nestled between the Tigris and the Euphrates, this stretch of land was home to the world's oldest culture. (The bulk of it was in present-day Iraq.) As a matter of fact, because of its ancient status, Mesopotamia was often called the cradle of civilization.



People began to move into Mesopotamia more than 9,000 years ago. Since very early on, they had shown a great interest in medicine. They wanted to know why people got sick. They wanted to know how to make them better. They did a lot of research on this matter. And they kept a detailed account of their findings.

Thanks to their excellent records, we know that there were two types of healers in Mesopotamia. The first was called *ashipus*. An *ashipu* was like a sorcerer or a witch doctor. He saw patients and determined the causes of their ailments. Back in those days, people believed that evil spirits made people sick. To recover, they had to please the gods they had upset earlier. And that was when an *ashipu* came into play. When a man fell ill, an *ashipu* would pay him a visit. He would tell the man which god was angry with him. He would tell the man what he had to do to make amends. For example, the man might need

to say a certain prayer or chant to drive out the evil spirit. He might need to sacrifice an animal. Or he might need to perform some magic rituals. Sometimes, when necessary, an *ashipu* would refer his patient to see the second kind of healer called *asus*. An *asu* was a specialist in herbal remedies. He wrote prescriptions to cure diseases. Occasionally, he would perform surgeries, too. Shocking as it may be, people in Mesopotamia were already advanced enough to perform eye or even brain surgery.

Of course, undergoing surgery was a big deal in Mesopotamia. The risk was very high. To protect the patients and the healers, there were specific laws in the Code of Hammurabi governing the use of a knife. If a surgery went as planned, the patient was obligated to pay the *asu* for his work. But if it went wrong, the *asu* would be held liable for the mistake. The amount of money or the type of punishment an *asu* got depended solely on the status of his patient. For example, if an *asu* successfully treated a nobleman, he would get 10 shekels of silver. For the same service, he would get 5 shekels for treating a commoner or 2 for a slave. Likewise, if an *asu* killed a nobleman on an operating table, one of his hands would be cut off. Suppose the unlucky patient was a slave; the *asu* simply had to repay the owner the cost of the slave.

By all accounts, people in Mesopotamia did not have very accurate notions when it came to medicine. Nevertheless, they studied the human body carefully and knew how it worked. As a result, they made many important discoveries. Those findings were critical to our modern science!



Name _____

Medicine in Mesopotamia

Questions

- _____ 1. Which of the following about medicine in Mesopotamia is correct?
- A. People in Mesopotamia went to see *ashipus* to get prescriptions.
 - B. An *ashipu* would never refer his patients to see an *asu*.
 - C. People in Mesopotamia went to see *ashipus* to get magic spells and chants.
 - D. People in Mesopotamia did not believe in witchcraft.
- _____ 2. In the minds of people in Mesopotamia, what were the causes of ailments?
- A. Germs
 - B. Viruses
 - C. Water
 - D. Evil spirits
- _____ 3. In Mesopotamia, who could perform brain surgery?
- A. An *ashipu*
 - B. An *asu*
- _____ 4. What would happen if a patient of high social status died on an operating table in Mesopotamia?
- A. Nothing would happen to the surgeon.
 - B. The surgeon had to pay for the funeral.
 - C. The surgeon had to pay 10 shekels of silver.
 - D. One of the surgeon's hands would be cut off.

- _____ 5. What did *ashipus* do in Mesopotamia?
- A. They treated wounds with herbs.
 - B. They performed brain surgeries.
 - C. They prescribed herbal remedies.
 - D. They performed witchcraft.
- _____ 6. Where was Mesopotamia?
- A. In present-day Iran
 - B. In present-day Egypt
 - C. In present-day Iraq
 - D. In present-day Saudi Arabia
- _____ 7. In Mesopotamia, what determined how much a surgeon got paid?
- A. The surgeon's reputation
 - B. All surgeons in Mesopotamia charged the same fee.
 - C. The patient's status in society
 - D. The surgeon's status in society
- _____ 8. Which king in Mesopotamia made laws governing the practice of surgeries?
- A. Sumuabum
 - B. Nabopolassar
 - C. Nebuchadnezzar
 - D. Hammurabi

Compare and contrast the medical practices in Mesopotamia and medical practices that you see today. What's the same, and what has changed based on what you read and what you already know?
