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The ancient Egyptians developed a medical system that was highly advanced for its time. Homer (c. 850 BC) remarked in the Odyssey that ‘in Egypt, the men are more skilled in medicine than any of human kind,’ and according to Herodotus (484-425 BC) ‘Egyptian medicine is so specialized that each physician is a healer of one disease and no more.’ Their medical specialties included surgery, gastroenterology, proctology, dentistry, ophthalmology and the unspecified ‘inspection of liquids’. Ancient Egyptian surgeons - literally translated as ‘doctors who supervise butchers’ - were mainly concerned with circumcision, drainage of abscesses, amputations and setting of bones.

As in other ancient cultures, Egyptian medicine also dealt with the supernatural. Possession by malevolent spirits was generally considered to be the cause of illness. Therefore, there was no clear distinction between physicians and priests. Both used incantation, amulets and magic for the treatment of the sick. The priest-physicians were also responsible for the preparation of the dead and removal of the internal organs for mummmification purposes.

The combination of surgery, autopsy and mummmification gave the Egyptians a vast knowledge of the body’s morphology and a considerable understanding of organ function. Although the function of most organs was known correctly, there were some misunderstandings. The heart for instance, was considered to be the seat of thought and reason. Also the function of the kidneys was misunderstood. They were not seen as excretory organs as urine was thought to be formed in the urinary bladder. Hence, the otherwise functionless kidneys were given a spiritual role and were seen as the seat of strength, emotion and wisdom. Their well-hidden position in the body was considered essential for the safekeeping of man’s most inner feelings and secrets. It was Galen (131-200 AD) who after many centuries provided conclusive experimental evidence that the kidneys produce urine.

The Egyptian perspective on the kidneys spread into other cultures. In Hebrew tradition, the kidneys were considered the most important internal organs along with the heart. In the Old Testament the kidneys are associated with the inner emotional life, and the heart is regarded as the seat of thought. The Talmud, which is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism, states that ‘there are in man two kidneys; one gives good advice, the other one provides bad counsel’. The kidneys are mentioned five times in the Bible as the organs examined by God in passing judgment on a person. In modern translations of the Bible however, the original word ‘kidney’ is replaced by ‘secret thoughts’, ‘soul’, or even ‘heart’.

Now modern medical science has given us a clear understanding of the kidney and its functions, and although the kidney itself is no longer associated with the
seat of inner feelings, this association is still noticeable in the Dutch proverb ‘in hart en nieren’, which is a way to indicate strong conviction.

REFERENCES

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