We have quite a bit of information about ancient Egyptian medicine. Physician's manuals have been found to tell us what they did for the sick and injured. Although many of the treatments included magic, ancient Egyptians used herbs and other remedies to treat many disorders.

Religion, magic, and medicine were closely related in Ancient Egypt. Some priests were specially trained as physicians to care for the sick, injured, and mentally ill. Physicians were held to a high standard of ethics. Patients were treated with respect, and their personal information was highly confidential. The highest-ranking doctors were priests of the goddess Sekhmet, who controlled plagues and illnesses. Physicians spent a part of each year serving the goddess. Doctors were thought to be close to the gods and able to ask them for healing.

Temples were centers for healing. When a person was ill, he or she would come to the temple or call for a doctor for a diagnosis. An obvious problem was treated with medicine, prayer, and magic. If a clear cause was not discovered, the diagnosis would usually be attributed to an evil spirit or curse. The physician would use magic spells or amulets (magic charms) to bring about a cure. Occasionally a diagnosis could not be reached. In this case, a patient would be told to rest for a period of time until another examination could be performed.

Ancient Egyptians were very superstitious. When a person was bothered by an evil spirit or ill will from someone who had died, amulets were given to them to wear. These charms were worn around the neck and supposedly had magic powers to ward off evil spirits and curses. Physicians used substances from animals, plants, and minerals to make aromatic substances to place in the amulets. Sweet smelling oils and powders were used to attract good gods who could heal the patient. In order to drive away evil gods and spirits, foul smelling ingredients were used. In addition, magic spells and prayers were offered for the patient.

Within the physician's manuals found in Egypt are formulas for medicine, surgical procedures, and many pages devoted to gynecology. Medicines were made from plants such as garlic, lotus flowers, henna, and juniper berries. Physicians also had knowledge of anesthetics to dull pain. They had many medical treatments for fertility and pregnancy. There were also entries explaining how to cure numerous female ailments. Problems related to childbirth and contraceptive measures are also covered in these manuals. The manuals have given us much information about the medical practices in ancient Egypt.

The Ancient Egyptians embalmed their dead before placing them in tombs. Embalming was a practice where oils and herbs were used to preserve the body for the afterlife. As part of the embalming process, the organs were removed from the body and placed in special jars called canopic jars. Because of this practice, physicians had some knowledge of the human body. This helped them to perform simple surgical techniques. They removed tumors, treated wounds, and had techniques for broken and dislocated bones. They also had a limited understanding of some anatomical functions. For example, they knew that the heart created a pulse beat. However, most of their ideas were wrong. The manuals explained that the heart was the center of all functions, from emotions to moving life through a person. They believed in one system of vessels that flowed from the heart and carried all fluids throughout the body. Still, their practice of examining the inner workings of the body led to many future discoveries.

The Ancient Egyptians experimented with different treatments, surgical procedures, and medicines. Despite their use of magic in treating the sick, we owe much to the physicians in Ancient Egypt. They opened the door to our modern medical science by making discoveries in anatomy and medicine. From there, these ideas spread around the world, all thanks to the ancient Egyptians.
Name ______________________

Medicine in Ancient Egypt

Questions

1. Physicians in ancient Egypt were specially trained ______.

2. What is an amulet?

3. The goddess, Sekhmet controlled ______.
   A. healing and cures
   B. plagues and illnesses
   C. medicine and magic
   D. all bodily functions

4. Ancient Egyptians believed ______ was the center of all bodily functions.
   A. the blood
   B. the liver
   C. the heart
   D. the brain

5. How did ancient Egyptian physicians learn so much about the human body?

6. How do we know so much about the knowledge of ancient Egyptian physicians?
   A. physician's manuals
   B. writings on the walls of physician's tombs
   C. books of wisdom found in temples
   D. physician's notebooks

7. Physicians received specialized training in Ancient Egyptian medicine.
   A. true
   B. false

8. Sweet smelling oils and powders were used in amulets to drive away evil spirits from a patient.
   A. false
   B. true

Imagine you are a doctor in ancient Egypt. What would you do to treat someone with a broken arm?
Explain the similarities between the ethics of ancient Egyptian physicians and modern physicians. Why are these things important?