**Thucydides, the Athenian Plague and Greek Medicine**

Thucydides (c. 460-400 BC) the father of scientific history also has a place in the pantheon of epidemiology. He was the author of the Peloponnesian War (432-404 BC).

The Peloponnesian war was between Athens and her allies and Sparta and her allies. Athens controlled the sea and Sparta the land. In 431 during a Spartan siege of Athens while the city was packed with refugees from the country side the plague broke out. Thucydides, who contacted the plague, was one of the few to survive. Athens possibly lost 25,000 out of 100,000 people. Some historians put these figures higher. Thucydides deals with the disease in strictly scientific terms and not as a divine punishment. His detailed description of the symptoms does not quite match any known disease. Scholars have identified about 30 candidates. This lecture reviews 10 of the most likely candidates and concludes that typhoid was the most likely cause of the plague.

Hippocrates (c. 460 - 370 BC) is credited with being the first doctor to believe that diseases were caused naturally and not as a punishment inflicted by the gods. It is quite likely that some of the physicians of the previous period did not believe the gods were responsible for disease. Thus Hippocrates’ main achievement was collecting case studies, identifying the disease and publishing treatment methods. Prior to Hippocrates Greek doctors kept their knowledge secret passing it down to sons or disciples. Thucydides and Hippocrates probably met in Northern Greece c. 425 BC. Thucydides’ description of the plague, which hints at the germ theory and immunization, was obviously influenced by the Hippocratic method.

Hippocratic medicine prevailed throughout the ancient world. Hippocrates’ work was edited by the doctors Erasistratus and Herophilus in Alexandria, Egypt c. 200 BC and again by Galen in 200 AD. Hippocratic medicine remained the basis of medical studies until the mid-19th century when Pasteur discovered the germ theory of disease.