

Medical History

Ancient Indian Medical Teaching

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Ancient India was famous for its world-renowned seats of learning. The major institutes of higher learning, which may be described as “universities” in modern terms, developed during the Buddhist era. These centres of learning were famous for their theological teaching as well as inclusion of so-called secular academic subjects like astronomy and medicine. In this article, we will describe some of the centres for medical teaching in ancient India. It must be noted that ancient India did not have hospitals. All treatments were conducted either at the clinic of the “Baidya” or at home of the patient. Even surgeries were conducted at the home of the patient. So, medical teaching also took place at these sites only.

The first name which pops up is the University of Taxila. Many scholars consider this to be one of the oldest institutes of higher education in the world. The exact date of establishment is not known, but the oldest part of the ruins (Fig 1) has been dated to 6th century BCE. It was finally destroyed in the 5th century CE.

At Taxila, secular subjects like military art, law and medicine were taught in addition to Buddhist scriptures and the Vedas. The medical faculty of Taxila was one of the best in ancient India. Probably, both medicine and surgery were taught at that school. The study of medicinal plants was particularly stressed upon. Jivaka, the famed personal physician to Gautam Buddha, was a student of this university. Atreya, the court physician of the Gandhara kingdom, was a renowned medical teacher of Taxila and he is credited with formulating the bedrock of the Ayurveda system of medicine. It is not known whether the University of Taxila had an attached hospital. But among the ruins, many medical instruments made of copper have been found (Fig 2). This leads one to guess that probably surgical procedures were also taught and performed here.

The next medical school which deserve mention is the University of Nalanda. This university in Eastern India was founded in the Gupta age and became world famous for its excellence in academia. Like Taxila, Nalanda University also had teaching faculty both for religious subjects as well as scientific disciplines. Since the university was completely razed to the ground by foreign attackers, the only source of our knowledge about this great university is the writings

and memoirs of foreign students like Yi Jing from China. According to them, medicine was taught at this university under “Guru”s and some amount of research was also conducted. The oral method of teaching was followed and students were encouraged to engage in discussions with the teachers. There were medical students not only from different parts of India but also from China, Java, Cambodia etc. Like Atreya of Taxila, Acharya Shilvadra was the legendary medical teacher of Ayurveda at Nalanda.

Medical training in ancient India was a prolonged course of 6-8 years. After that, pupils were expected to stay with and observe their teachers for years together. Sushruta had advised practising surgical procedures on vegetables and dead animals before embarking on human cases. However, it is not known whether Charaka or Sushruta were medical teachers or not.



Fig 1 — Ruins of the University of Taxila in Pakistan (Wikimedia Commons)

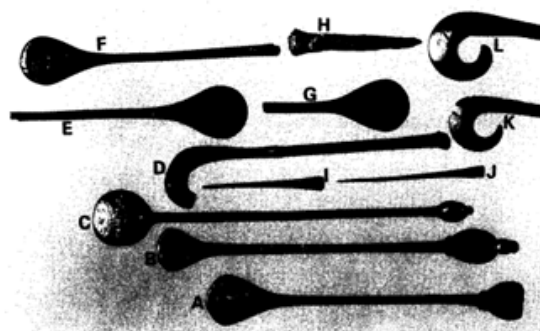


Fig 2 — Surgical instruments found at Taxila ruins: Naqvi NH.