

Sushruta – Ancient Medical Practitioner Ahead of Time

Personal perspective

Abstract

As a medical doctor with 35 years of experience as a modern medical practitioner, I know how modern medical science teaches an organ and system-based approach learning building up into a disease-based approach to the treatment. This is a popular system and most of us just follow the system, however there are learning from the old Indian system of science with different approaches, such as emulated by the writings of Sushruta was one of the ancient Indian surgeon and physician who impressed me. He was ahead of his time in thinking and has written several treatises, so as to share the knowledge widely.

Keywords

Sushruta, modern medicine

Introduction

Sushruta is considered the “Father of Plastic Surgery.” He lived in India sometime between 1000 and 800 BC, and is responsible for the advancement of medicine in ancient India. Controversy exists about the time when Sushruta lived, with opinions about the time of his existence ranging from 1000 BC to 10th century AD. Son of Vishvamitra, Sushruta was the disciple of Dhanvantri, Divodasa Kasi Raja.¹ Under him Sushruta learned the basis of Ayurveda with special emphasis on Salya (surgery) and this is supposed to have happened in the Upanishadic age. After this, he started writing the Sushruta Samhita while teaching in the Benaras University, situated by the river Ganges in north India.²

The earliest documents concerning Indian medicine were confined to texts called Kalpas, and small monographs, and did not include any surgical subjects. His teaching of anatomy, pathophysiology, and therapeutic strategies were of unparalleled luminosity, especially considering his time in the historical record.³ The influential nature of the *Sushruta Samhita*, the compendium documenting Sushruta’s theories about medicine, is supported not only by anatomical knowledge and surgical procedural descriptions contained within its pages, but by the creative approaches that still hold true today.

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The Sushruta Samhita provides minute details of preoperative and postoperative care, diet, techniques, indications and contraindications, and complications. Sushruta believed that knowledge of both surgery and medicine are essential to constitute a good doctor who otherwise 'is like a bird with only one wing.' The followers of Sushruta were called *Saushrutas*. The new student was expected to study for at least 6 years. Before starting his training he had to take a solemn oath, which can be compared to that of Hippocrates or Maimonides.⁴

There are a few concepts that we can learn from Sushruta's teachings and put into our own practice.

Emphasising the Holistic Approach

Like Sushruta, modern medicine doctors can also embrace a holistic approach to patient care. Understanding that physical health is interconnected with mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being allows us to provide comprehensive care to our patients. Integrating elements of mind-body medicine, counselling, and wellness programs into our practice can contribute to better patient outcomes.

Appreciating the Historical Perspective:

Sushruta's pioneering work dates back thousands of years, yet many of his surgical techniques and principles have stood the test of time. By acknowledging the historical perspective of medicine, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the evolution of medical knowledge and build upon the foundations laid by ancient medical scholars.

Encouraging Personalised Treatments

Sushruta's emphasis on personalised treatment plans aligns with the modern concept of precision medicine. Today, advancements in genetics and technology allow us to tailor treatments to individual patients, taking into account their unique genetic makeup, lifestyle, and medical history. Genome analysis has become universally available now but most of us aren't able to use

it for our management regime. We need a few people who take lead to translate it for a use in treatment of common medical conditions.

Advocating for Ethical Practice:

Sushruta's teachings emphasised ethics, compassion, and empathy in medicine. These virtues remain relevant in modern healthcare, where maintaining patient trust, confidentiality, and informed consent are critical aspects of medical practice.

Striving for Surgical Excellence:

Sushruta's unparalleled surgical skills and attention to detail set a standard for surgical excellence. As modern surgeons, we can draw inspiration from his dedication to mastering surgical techniques and staying up-to-date with the latest advancements in surgical practices. I am not a surgeon but reading his literature is inspirational and I would recommend reading it even if you are not a surgeon because you can appreciate his thinking which was so structured and ahead of time.

Valuing Knowledge Sharing:

Sushruta's documentation of medical knowledge in the "Sushruta Samhita" highlights the importance of sharing knowledge within the medical community. Today, medical research, publications, and conferences serve as platforms for doctors to share their expertise and contribute to the advancement of medicine. Many of us do a lot of work, but are stuck in daily life routine and aren't able to present the work widely.

Embracing Cultural Diversity:

Sushruta's contributions were not limited to one region or culture but have influenced medical practices globally. As modern doctors, we work in diverse environments, encountering patients from various cultural backgrounds. Embracing cultural sensitivity and understanding can enhance patient-doctor relationships and improve healthcare outcomes.

Recognising the Limitations of Medicine:

Despite his remarkable achievements, Sushruta also acknowledged the limitations of medicine. I appreciated it because of his ability to go ahead of time to make advancement, but also recognise the limitations. As modern doctors, we must aim to fill the gaps in modern medicine but also recognise that medicine is continually evolving, and there may be challenges beyond our current capabilities. In such cases, humility and collaboration with colleagues become essential.

Concluding

I don't know whether this resonates with many of you, but I feel that while practicing medicine in the 21st century involves embracing the advancements of modern science and technology, we can still find valuable lessons from the teachings and practices of historical figures like Sushruta. By incorporating aspects of a holistic approach, personalised medicine, ethics, surgical excellence, and knowledge sharing, we can pay homage to the legacy of Sushruta while continuing to provide the best possible care for our patients.

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