

## The Womb Lay Still in Ancient Egypt

HAROLD MERSKEY and PAUL POTTER

Any reader of the handbooks of medical history will know that among the ancient Greeks, the womb was on occasion held to cause various complaints by moving about the body. A particularly graphic account is to be found in the *Timaeus* (91b–c), where, in likening sexual desire to an actual animal, Plato first mentions “. . . in men the organ of generation becoming rebellious and masterful like an animal disobedient to reason”, and then alludes to:

“. . . the so-called womb or matrix of women. The animal within them is desirous of procreating children, and when remaining unfruitful long beyond its proper time, gets discontented and angry, and wandering in every direction through the body, closes up the passages of the breath, and, by obstructing respiration, drives them to extremity, causing all varieties of disease . . .” (Jowett, 1953)

To what extent other Greek authors accepted the underlying principle of this unmistakably poetic depiction may be a matter for another discussion; here we examine the suggestion made by several leading historians of medicine that the notion of the wandering uterus existed even earlier, among the ancient Egyptians.

Two Egyptian papyri constitute our principal sources on this topic: the Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus (c. 1900 BC, named after its place of discovery), and the Georg Ebers Papyrus (c. 1550 BC, named after its European purchaser). The Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus, which was first edited and translated into English by F. L. Griffith (Griffith, 1898), consists of 34 gynaecological prescriptions occupying three pages. The Ebers Papyrus, about a fifth of which, incidentally, was lost during its storage at the time of World War II, had been definitively edited in 1913 by W. Wreszinski (1913). In 1937 the Norwegian physician B. Ebbell provided a complete English translation (Ebbell, 1937). The Ebers Papyrus’ 108 columns of writing deal mainly with internal medicine.

H. E. Sigerist (1951) quotes the Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus from Griffith’s publication, to suggest that a variety of symptoms are ascribed to a uterus that has moved up or down, is biting, or starving, or restless. He states further (p. 355):

“. . . we encounter the view that the major organs, the heart, the uterus, the stomach, the vessels, and others,

had some life of their own. They were able to wander around in the body, had appetites, whims, moods and had to be satisfied and pacified. This was a left-over of mythological views which persisted for a very long time.”

B. Ebbell, in the introduction to his translation of the Ebers Papyrus (p. 23), notes in passing that the Kahun Papyrus speaks of diseases in women and explains them as due to morbid states in the uterus or to a wandering uterus. He, too, bases his comments on the Griffith edition.

On the history of hysteria itself, the only comprehensive monograph in English is Ilza Veith’s *Hysteria. The History of a Disease* (Veith, 1965). She likewise relies on Griffith for her evaluation of the Kahun Papyrus, strangely making no reference to the definitive modern scholarly treatment of Egyptian medicine, Hermann Grapow’s *Grundriss der Medizin der alten Aegypter* (Grapow, 1954–1973). In this nine-volume work, a complete German translation of all the extant ancient Egyptian medical papyri, by H. von Deines, H. Grapow, and W. Westendorf, occupies volumes IV/1 and IV/2 (1958). Basing her opinion on the Griffith version, Veith emphasizes (p. 3)

“that certain behavioral disorders were associated with the generative organs, and specifically with aberrations in the *position* of the womb. This was so firmly established that no other explanation for the symptoms was so much as suggested.” (her italics).

As illustrations, she quotes several cases from the papyrus:

“‘a woman who loves bed; she does not rise and does not shake it,’ another woman ‘who is ill in seeing’ and who has a pain in her neck, a third ‘woman pained in her teeth and jaws; she knows not how to open her mouth,’ and, finally, ‘a woman aching in all her limbs with pain in the sockets of her eyes.’ These and similar disturbances were believed to be caused by ‘starvation’ of the uterus or by its upward dislocation with a consequent crowding of the other organs. The physician’s efforts were therefore quite logically directed towards nourishing the hungry organ or returning it to the place from which it had strayed . . . attempts were made to lure or drive the organ back as if it were a living, independent organism. The parts were fumigated with precious and sweet-smelling substances to attract the womb; or evil-tasting and foul-smelling substances were

ingested or inhaled to repel the organ and drive it away from the upper part of the body where it was thought to have wandered.”

Veith further cites Ebbell’s text of the Ebers Papyrus to support her hypothesis (p. 4ff.):

“Among the elaborations are the detailed prescriptions ‘to cause a woman’s womb to go to its place’. The remedies and their modes of application show the highly imaginative approaches by which control of hysterical symptoms was attempted. One prescription, a potion composed of tar from the wood of a ship and the dregs of beer, was supposed, by its evil taste, to induce the descent of the uterus. Other recipes listed ointments, compounded from a variety of unpleasant ingredients, that were used to rub the affected parts of the body in order to drive down the uterus. One such ointment was composed of dry excrement moistened with beer: ‘The fingers of the woman are rubbed with it; thou shalt apply it to all her limbs and to her diseased place.’ . . . Further modes of treatment are described wherein fumigation by means of fragrant and powerful substances is used. Among these, ‘dry excrement of men is placed on frankincense, and the woman is fumigated therewith; let the fume thereof enter into her vulva.’ . . . this particular prescription suggests a deliberate choice. The implication of gratifying the uterus with discharges from the opposite sex cannot be disregarded.

As a final measure ‘. . . to cause the womb to go back to its place: an ibis of wax is placed on charcoal, and let the fumes thereof enter into her vulva.”

Veith explains this prescription as a magical remedy based upon reverence for the god Thoth, whose symbol is the ibis. She argues that the image of the powerful male deity was used to lure back a wandering female organ.

Veith herself admits (p. 6) that the ideas she puts forward “are nowhere spelled out in detail”. In fact, the actual texts themselves never give any indication at all of the rationale for the measures they promulgate. Veith’s explanatory statements, then, are strictly her own interpretations. For example, the remedy in which tar is used reads (Ebers 791): “Oakum tar (?) that is on the wood of a ship . . . is rubbed with dregs of excellent beer, and let her drink it”. The implied purpose of the remedy is (Ebers 789) “to cause a woman’s womb to go to its place”. According to Veith, the evil taste of this medicine is intended to make the womb descend. It could equally be argued that this orally administered remedy is simply to put right a prolapsed uterus: in this case, the whole series of Veith’s interpretations is cast into doubt.

Indeed, the relevant texts as they appear in Grapow’s translation lend little support to the views on hysteria outlined by Ebbell, Sigerist, and Veith. Let us now turn to the papyri.

### The Kahun Papyrus

The nosological chapters of the Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus reveal a tripartite structure consisting of the elements: *Indication, Explanation, Prescription*. This format does not determine the pattern with the same rigidity that is found in the Edwin Smith surgical papyrus, where the formal sequence *Title/ Examination/Statement on treatability/Treatment* is used for every case; however, there can be no doubt of its fundamental significance. Kahun 4 illustrates the arrangement. We show the text with square brackets [ ] to indicate a gap in the original restored by the translators. The sign < > implies an explanatory text added by the translators.

*Indication* (symptoms) “Medicine of a woman who [suffers] in her pudenda, vulva, region of the vulva, and between her buttocks:”

*Explanation* (specific pathology) “Then you should say about that: [it is] a great enlargement (as the result) of a birth.”

*Prescription* “Then you should make against it: new olive oil, one *hin*; pour into [her] vulva, her . . .”

In 12 of the cases recorded in the Kahun Gynaecological Papyrus (1–3, 5–11, 16, 23/24) the uterus figures in the *Explanation* section of the text in the formula. “It is the *x*-phenomenon (as a result) of the uterus”. Twice (5, 23/24) the ‘*x*-phenomenon’ is toothache, in cases 1 and 9 physical damage of the papyrus makes the term illegible, and in the rest of the cases the Egyptian word given is of unknown meaning.

The symptoms to which these explanations correspond are located throughout the body:

- (1) eyes and neck
- (2) uterus
- (3) anus, pubis, thighs
- (5) teeth and mouth
- (6) limbs and eyes
- (7) feet and legs
- (8) back of the neck, pudendum, ears
- (9) vulva, all members
- (10) urine
- (11) patient is bedridden
- (16) all parts of the body
- (23/24) teeth.

The means by which the uterus produces the recorded symptoms are never stated, nor is any uterine movement ever indicated in these chapters. Furthermore, the respective *Prescription* sections, which for the most part recommend vapour-baths applied to the vulva, do not mention the uterus at all.

In summary then, the Kahun Papyrus links ailments in a wide variety of bodily locations to the

uterus, but never gives the slightest indication why or how this organ is to blame.

### The Ebers Papyrus

Two chapters of the Ebers Papyrus explicitly mention movement of the uterus:

- 789 "Medication to make a woman's uterus return to its position: give pine saw-dust in (beer) sediment; anoint (with this) a brick of *dzjw*; make the woman sit on it."
- 795 "Another (medication) to make the uterus return to its position: put an ibis of wax onto charcoal; have the smoke that is given off enter the woman's genitals."

Five other chapters (790–794) that begin "Another (medication)" are presumably prescriptions for the same condition. The condition here referred to is most likely to be prolapse of the uterus. In these seven chapters no symptom at a distance is ever mentioned.

### Discussion

There seems to be no evidence to justify the claim that the ancient Egyptians believed that the womb wandered, and particularly the claim that it caused globus hystericus. The belief in the animate uterus is untenable when confronted with the primary texts.

The notion of luring the womb back with aromatic fumigation is evocative and may be plausible, but it is not enunciated in the actual sources we have examined. Such an explanation would also have to account for such unpleasant items as excrement being applied both above to repel and below to attract. It seems more logical to suppose that Egyptian therapists believed that excrement contained some useful ingredient, and that this medication could be introduced either by perineal application or in a potion. The imaginative suggestion by Veith that dried excrement of a man was a deliberate choice to gratify the uterus can be explained more simply. Excrement may merely make an aroma more pungent. According to the *Talmud*, for example, urine increases the pungency of incense, but it was not used in the Temple out of respect (*Keritot* 6a).

We should note also that the papyri are terse and pragmatic. They describe symptoms briefly, state a cause, and proceed to list the remedies which may be applied. Most importantly for us, when the uterus is blamed for a symptom at a distance, it is never said to be mobile, and when it is said to be out of

its place, there is never any symptom at a distance.

Prolapse of the womb must have been long recognised, likewise enlargement of the womb with pregnancy, filling the abdomen. Puerperal fever following a pregnancy would give rise to widespread effects in the body. Changes locally may be attributed to the uterus (vulval changes, back pain). More remote effects on the legs or eyes may be attributed in the first case to the sort of oedema which occurs in dependent limbs in pregnancy, and in the second case to a blood-borne humour. The Egyptians recognised the effects of substances taken by mouth as spreading throughout the body, and the Ebers Papyrus describes a detailed system of blood vessels. Perimenstrual and periodic effects might also all be recognised without invoking a wandering womb migrating so far as to cause globus hystericus. In addition, changes with puberty and with the menopause may be observed empirically. Thus, Egyptian doctors had a basis in observation to recognise effects at a distance. Any interpretations given in the papyri are naturalistic, and do not involve a wandering womb.

### Conclusions

We conclude that there is no warrant for the fanciful view that the ancient Egyptians believed that a variety of bodily complaints were due to an animate, wandering womb. In so far as we can appraise their medical opinions about the uterus, their views seem to be based on direct observation without elaborate speculation. All the information available so far shows that whatever views about hysteria may have been held in the Greek world, the wandering womb did not come from Egypt.

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\*Harold Merskey, DM, FRCP, FRCP(C), FRCPsych, FAPA, *Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Western Ontario*; Paul Potter, MD, CM DrPhil, *Hannah Professor of the History of Medicine, Department of History of Medicine and Science, University of Western Ontario*

Correspondence: *Department of Research, London Psychiatric Hospital, 850 Highbury Avenue, PO Box 2532, Terminal A, London, Ontario, N6A 4H1 Canada*