

From the pages of History

Medical Emblem: A Tale of Two Symbols

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Careful observers would have noticed that medical profession is represented by not one but two symbols. Almost all self-respecting professional healthcare organisations have chosen "Rod of Asclepius" while most of the commercial healthcare establishments have opted for "Caduceus". This seeming discord between service and commerce aspects of our profession has infuriated some perceptive commentators. Daniel P. Sulmasy, in particular, has remarked – "It is hard to trust a profession that cannot even get its symbols straight". So, which one of these symbols is the right one? To answer this question, we have to carefully examine the historical evidence.



Rod of Asclepius (asklepian) belonged to god of healing in Greek mythology, Asclepius. He was the son of Apollo and Coronis, and he was instructed in the art of medicine and healing by the centaur Chiron. Asclepius became such a skilled physician that he could bring dead back to life. Many temples were erected in his honour and he was worshipped as god of healing. His staff with an encircled snake has come to symbolize healing and resurrection. However, some commentators have claimed that it is the symbolic representation of the traditional treatment for Guinea worm infestation. His daughters, Meditrine, Hygeia and Panacea became symbols of different branches of health care – medicine, hygiene and healing. Even Hippocrates acknowledged their importance by invoking Asclepius, Hygeia and Panacea in addition to Apollo in his original oath. So, the credentials of Asclepius as a physician and healer are impeccable.

What about **Caduceus**? Well, it was the wand of Hermes, also known as Mercury in Roman mythology. He was god of commerce, trickery, invention, witchcraft and eloquence, and he was also the protector of thieves. How did his wand become medical symbol? Well, in 6th century AD it was used as an emblem of their trade by alchemists. But in 1902, an army officer entrusted with responsibility of replacing Cross with a new medical symbol by Army Medical Corps of U.S. chose Caduceus instead of Rod of Asclepius. It might have been a mistaken identity or ignorance of historical significance or a pre-occupation with visual impact. Whatever! It definitely was an abject capitulation to style over substance. His fateful decision has since been uncritically accepted by large number commercial healthcare establishments in U.S and (not surprisingly) almost all medical colleges in India. Sadly, according Luke Van Orden, "it may be symbolic of how the medical profession has evolved in late twentieth century". So, should we follow their example?



The core committee members of CHCMJ in their collective wisdom feel that the wisdom and the principles of Asclepius should serve the interests of medical profession much better and his staff is the true symbol of the principles healing on which the modern medicine stands. We have decided to display it on the front cover of our Journal. We hope you agree with our decision. If you don't, please let us know.