

Vitiligo – The Historical Curse of Depigmentation

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Vitiligo, the “small blemish” (from the latin vitulum; Mercurialis, 1572, fig.1) was first described more than 1500 years BC. It is probable that ancient descriptions represent other diseases, such as leprosy, as it is only in the last century that vitiligo vulgaris has been used to describe the disease process of acquired melanocyte destruction (Singh et al, 1974).

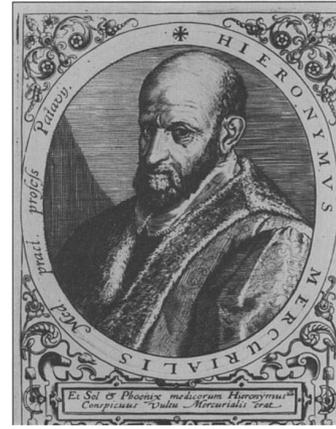


Fig 1 - Mercurialis (16th C. Padua)

Early attempts at treatment mirror contemporary therapies too, as both ancient Egyptian and Indian writings depict psoralen-containing plants such as Ammi majus (fig.7) and Psoralea corylifolia (fig.8) being applied to pale macules and then exposed to sunlight.



Fig.7- Ammi majus



Fig.8 - Psoralea corylifolia

Not all societies appear to have discriminated against the depigmented, historically. In the 17th century Yi dynasty in Korea, the medical text book the Doney Bogam describes the skin disorders of vitiligo, tinea versicolor, naevus depigmentosus, naevus anaemicus and albinism as a single hypopigmentary disorder. Treatment is similarly described as if for a single disease entity (Hann and Chung, 1997). Socially, the Koreans were tolerant of depigmentation cosmetically as this portrait of Chang Myeong Song (a high ranking government official in the Yi dynasty) shows, with “vitiliginous” depigmentation of the face and

neck (fig.11). There is clearly no confusion of this illness with leprosy in 17th century Korea, otherwise perhaps this portrait of a ruler would have been altered to disguise the affliction? (Lee, 1982).



Fig.11 – Vitiligo face and neck, 17th C. Korea

Both pre-Hindu Vedic (fig.2) and ancient Egyptian texts (fig.3) give a clear record of depigmented macules, the Vedic myth being that the anthropomorphic deification of the sun, Bhagavatam, developed vitiligo after being gazed upon by his illegitimate son (fig.4). In one of the first text books of Ayurvedic medicine, the Charaka samhita (100 AD), svitra (“whiteness”) is recorded as a diagnosis (fig.5). An accurate description also exists in a collection of Japanese Shinto prayers, Amarakosa, dating from 1200 BC (fig.6) (Nair et al, 1978).



Fig.2 – The Atharvaveda ~ 1500 BC

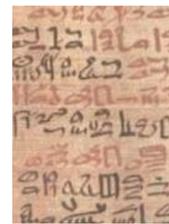


Fig.3 – Ebers Papyrus ~ 1500 BC

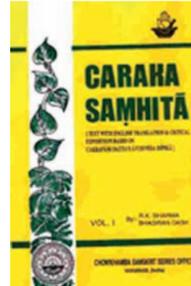


Fig.5 – a modern Charaka samhita



Fig.4 – Bhagavatam, the Vedic Sun God



Fig.6 - modern Shinto priest at prayer

Leprosy is recorded as a pale swelling, distinct from vitiligo in the Ebers Papyrus (an Egyptian collection of writings from 1500 – 3000 BC, fig.2), but there is no such demarcation between the two diseases in either the Bible (fig.9) or in the first European description of the disease by Hippocrates (fig.10). Sadly, this type of “non-discrimination” persists in many communities in the world today, where vitiligo sufferers are sometimes shunned in the same age-old way as people with leprosy. To his credit, Hippocrates was the first to report that vitiligo was easier to treat at the onset of the illness rather than after many years had elapsed, a recognised clinical feature of the illness today.



Fig.9 – Book of Job, a leper. 15th C. Catalonia

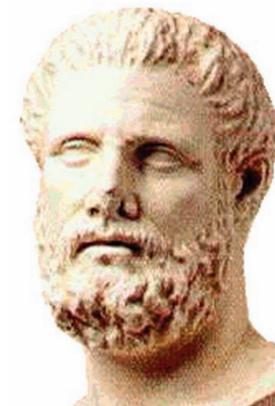


Fig.10 – Hippocrates 400 ~ BC Greece

The end of the 19th century was a time of much progress in the understanding of vitiligo. Moriz Kaposi in Vienna was one of the first to describe the histopathology, observing only a lack of pigment granules in the deep rete cells (Kaposi, 1879; fig.12, fig.13). At around the same time, in Bergen, Gerhard Hansen observed the presence of small rods within “lepra cells” and thus established a clear pathogenesis for leprosy (Fyrand, 1983). Both Neumann in Vienna (1880) and Brocq (1892) in Paris observed that episodes of emotional stress can lead to flare-ups of vitiligo. They also both noticed that none of the then available treatments made much impact on the disease! *Plus ça change?*



Fig.12 – Moriz Kaposi, 1837-1902

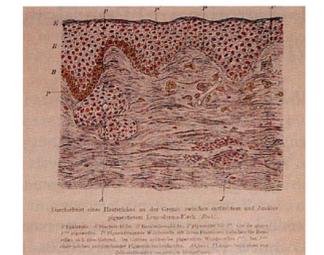


Fig.13 – Leucoderma (vitiligo) histology, Kaposi, 1899

We have much to learn from both the sociological and medical history of vitiligo, if we are to make progress in improving the management of this ancient disease in the modern world.

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