HEALING PRACTICES OF ANCIENT EGYPT MAY BE RELEVANT TO MODERN MEDICINE

Boston, Mass.--"Moor the patient at his mooring stake," was an ancient Egyptian metaphor referring to the practice of allowing the body to heal without medical intervention. According to J. Worth Estes, M.D., a professor of pharmacology at Boston University School of Medicine and author of the new book, The Medical Skills of Ancient Egypt, this recommendation may be as applicable today as it was five thousand years ago. In his book, Estes examines ancient Egyptian healing methods--gleaned from surviving art, literature and mummified remains--and explores their relevance to modern medicine.

According to Estes, the fact that the ancient physicians did not know as much as we do about how the body works did not hinder their ability to heal. "By looking at how an ancient society maintained its health in the absence of what today we consider effective medical interventions, we can gain clues to what happens when the body is left to its own healing devices--that is, when the patient is simply 'moored,'" says Estes. "Today, it is often assumed that all medical intervention is necessarily good, but that assumption may not be valid in all cases," he adds.

Ancient Egyptian physicians used treatments that arose from magic and were developed into a rational system of therapeutics. Despite the fact that few of those remedies would be considered effective today, their application then was confirmed by the observations of many generations of healers. Although their knowledge of pathophysiology was solely speculative, they used a wide range of drugs to treat their patients. For example, the healing of a wound following treatment with honey warranted its acceptance as effective
treatment. Moreover, the antibacterial properties of honey, which Estes has demonstrated in his laboratory, might well have offered enough protection to permit the wound to heal on its own.

According to Estes, "History shows us that we do not always have to swallow a pill or undergo surgery to be relieved of our medical problems. Unfortunately, many people feel they haven't been helped unless they leave the doctor's office with a prescription." He adds that an exploration of the medical skills of ancient Egypt teaches us that the practice of watchful waiting, or 'mooring,' may sometimes be an optimal approach to healing. He suggests that we look upon the lessons of the past as well as those of the present as we try to achieve a balance between relying on medical treatment and understanding our own healing capacities.

Estes explains that his earlier studies of the medical practices of 18th century American and British physicians were particularly useful in his exploration of ancient Egypt. He found that even as late as the 18th century, the majority of patients received little medical benefit from remedies prescribed then—many of which survived from ancient Egypt. "In the absence of major epidemics during the 18th century, 94 to 95 percent of all adult patients recovered, regardless of what treatments they received," says Estes. "Based on this information and what we know about ancient therapies, it is probable that the recovery of most Egyptian patients was also a result of their ability to heal naturally rather than through specific medical intervention."

Estes has been teaching modern medical pharmacology at Boston University School of Medicine for 22 years. His research focuses on understanding historical approaches to health and healing, and how they relate to present and future medicine. He was recently elected secretary/treasurer of the American Association for the History of Medicine.