

Hippocrates' tree

The writings attributed to Hippocrates have influenced medical education for the past 2400 years. Our own teaching is still based on their high ethical traditions and their principles continue to guide our work as clinicians and our responsibilities to our patients and to society.

As the birthplace of Hippocrates in 460BC, the Greek island of Kos is a magnet for medical practitioners and medical students from around the world. Kos is also the site of the ruins of the Asklepeion. This is one of the first sanctuaries founded in honour of Asklepios, son of Apollo and the god of health and medicine. The fame of this sanctuary is again linked to Hippocrates, as it is here that he is said to have founded the world's first school of medicine and his hospital. This was an important site of healing and worship throughout classic times, although a series of earthquakes over the millennia have left much of the original sanctuary in ruins.

In the centre of a cobbled square in the main town of the island, also named Kos, stands an enormous plane tree. Legend is that this tree was planted by Hippocrates and that it was here, in its shade, that he later taught many of his students about his principles of medical practice.

Whether it truly is the original, or a descendent of the original, the tree is immense and very old. The core of the tree has rotted away over time leaving several separate fragments of the original trunk which spread branches out to a diameter of 12 metres. The trunk is surrounded by protective railing and scaffolding props up many of the surviving branches. Pieces of masonry surround the tree providing a place to sit.

It is a special experience to sit in the shade of this ancient tree where so many of our peers have sat before, and to reflect on our long tradition of healing and care.

As you would expect the tree is surrounded by

overpriced cafes and stalls selling copies of the Hippocratic Oath in a dozen different languages, marble busts of the great man, and small carved owls. Nearby is a mosque from the Ottoman era and the ruins of the medieval Castle of the Knights of St John.

An offshoot of the legendary tree has now also taken root in Australia. The University of Sydney has managed to secure a seedling from the plane tree that stands in the centre of Kos town, and this has been planted in the grounds of the new rural clinical school at Dubbo. So, one day, Australian medical students will be able to sit and learn about medicine in the shade of a descendent of the original tree of Hippocrates.

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