

SORANUS OF EPHESUS (98-138) ON POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION

SORAN IZ EFEZA (98.-138.) O POSTPARTALNOJ DEPRESIJI

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SUMMARY

Although ancient Greek physicians described several mental disorders, their medical texts bring little information about postpartum depression as defined by modern medicine. Only one reference in ancient Greek medical literature - a passage from Soranus' Gynaeciorum libri IV - can be considered a clear presentation of this mental disorder. Soranus' interpretation seems to be firmly based on the tenets of the four humours.

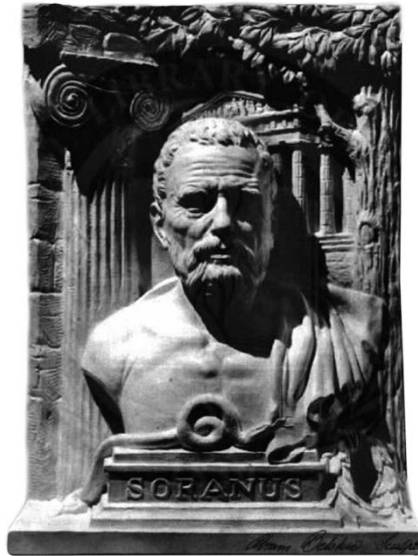
Key words: ancient Greek medicine; postpartum depression; mania; melancholy; Soranus of Ephesus

Although ancient Greek physicians had described several mental disorders, there is limited information in the medical texts about the postpartum depression as it is defined by modern medicine. Only one reference in ancient Greek medical literature can be considered as a clear presentation.

According to ancient Greek medical writings, postpartum depression was not a specific mental disorder. Ancient Greek physicians had recognized three basic mental diseases: mania [1], which can be associated with

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Soranus of Ephesus
(*Gynaeciorum libri IV*)

the modern concept of paranoia; melancholy [2] which is similar to modern definition of depression; and phrenitis [3] which has not an exact parallel in modern medicine but can be described as the condition where the patient has illusions due to high fever. Despite the special characteristics which led to the distinction of each mental disease, ancient Greek physicians believed that the loss of mental equilibrium is characterized by dementia and loss of ability to interpret the reality [4].

The only accurate description of postpartum depression in ancient Greek medical literature is found in an excerpt of *Gynaeciorum libri IV*, the work of the great authority in obstetrics and gynaecology, Soranus of Ephesus [5].

Soranus was born in Ephesus, in Asia Minor in the second half of the 1st century AD. He received his medical training in Alexandria, practiced in Rome under Trajan and Adrian and died toward the middle of the second century AD. Few details are preserved for his life and career except that he wrote approximately 20 books dealing with gynecology, internal medicine, surgery, pharmacology, ophthalmology, anatomy, embryology and philosophy, most of which are lost [6]. The biography of Hippocrates is also attributed to him. A part of his work on *Acute and Chronic Diseases* has survived, in

the transcript of Caelius Aurelianus. Even if he shared the theoretical viewpoint of the Methodic School, Soranus' version of Methodism was less schematic in its classification of diseases, focusing in the individual variation of each patient. His work *on Gynaecology* reflects the views on medical practice during the Roman period and is considered as a leading treatise on the subject, coming down to the middle ages via the School of Salerno [7].

In Soranus' text, we may find his direct statement that the nursing woman can become dangerous to the baby and harm it. Soranus, treated the subject of postpartum depression in a very paradoxical way. Providing several advices for the nursing woman he pointed out that she should remain calm without anger and he links her psychological condition to the type of food she consumes, believing that the food can provoke irritation and depression or happiness and forbearance, stressing therefore, the importance for an equilibrate nutrition. His point of view seems to derive from his belief to the fundamental principle of ancient Greek medicine, the theory of four humors (blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile) [8], based on a model of chain reaction triggering by the food. An imbalance of food intake may provoke (humoural imbalance) *dyskrasia*, which consequently may lead to the appearance of somatic and mental diseases. Therefore, we could assume that his intention was to underline that foods provoke the accumulation of yellow and black bile, which were considered by ancient Greek physicians as the mean reasons for mania and melancholy. In his text Soranus will underline that 'manic' woman frightened by the crying baby and not withstanding its cry, let it to fall from her hands: "Angry women are like maniacs and sometimes when the newborn cries from fear they are unable to restrain it, they let it drop from their hands or overturn it dangerously" [9]. In addition he will suggest that the nursing woman should not be superstitious and attached to religion, in order to avoid becoming dangerous for the newborn [5].

Finally, even if the sources about postpartum depression in ancient Greek medical literature are scarce, it is difficult to believe that this disease was unknown to ancient Greek physicians. Based on the creditability of Soranus we could consider his description as an example of ancient Greek physician's attitude towards this disorder. Therefore if a woman was presenting various symptoms of depression during puerperium, these were interpreted as symptoms of one of the three basic mental diseases of antiquity, mania, melancholy and phrenitis. Also we should not forget that these three mental disorders represented for the ancient Greek medical thought a trimorous theoretical scheme. This was used as a methodological approach to

all mental problems, because it embodied all types of mental disorders interpreting them on the base of the absolute relevance between body and *psyche* (mind), and relating them to the theory of four humours.

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SAŽETAK

Premda su stari Grčki liječnici pisali o različitim mentalnim poremećajima, nema gotovo nijednog zapisa o postpartalnoj depresiji u smislu kojem ga definira moderna medicina. Tek se jedna referenca u starogrčkoj medicinskoj literaturi može nedvosmisleno smatrati opisom ovog mentalnog poremećaja, a to je odlomak iz Soranovog Gynaeciorum libri IV. Sudeći iz zapisa, Soranovo se tumačenje poremećaja čvrsto temelji na načelima četiri tjelesne tekućine.

Ključne riječi: *starogrčka medicina; postpartalna depresija; manija; melankolija; Soran iz Efeza*