

The Roots of Contemporary Podiatric Medicine in Biblical Times

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For thousands of years, patients around the world have suffered from various forms of illness and disease. Throughout the centuries, advancements in technology and modern medicine have enabled physicians to readily diagnose and treat their patients more efficiently. Although today the medical industry has become successful in its treatment of even the most severe illnesses, thousands of years ago, most medical professionals were not able to successfully aid their patients due to a lack of knowledge and an inability to access adequate medication.

Today, most individuals are stringent when it comes to taking care of their overall health. Many visit their dentist twice a year, are advent on getting an annual eye examination, and even visit their general physician on a biannual basis. However, when it comes to the health of individual parts of the body, the foot is the part of the body that is the most neglected. According to the American Podiatric Medical Association, “healthy feet are fundamental to the quality of our lives. They are wondrously engineered and often are the indicators of our overall health” [1]. Feet are the foundation on which the body stands and operates. Even early on, the foot can indicate signs of medical conditions that can be related to other syndromes, such as diabetes, arthritis, and circulatory and nerve defects. It is unfortunate, however, that many individuals are not aware of the importance of proper foot care and do not realize that early detection of many illnesses can be identified through periodic foot evaluations.

Although healthy feet are vital to one’s overall health, many people do not have a clear understanding of when it is important to see their podiatrist. A podiatrist is a podiatric physician and surgeon who treats and diagnoses syndromes of the foot, ankle, and related structures of the lower extremities [2]. Podiatrists treat a variety of disorders and conditions, including bunions, diabetic ulcers, hammer toes, flat feet, Morton’s neuroma, tendinitis, sports injuries, athlete’s foot and so forth. Dr. Gail Rucker, one of the leading podiatric physicians in Washington D.C., suggests that people should visit their podiatrist regularly, even if they are not experiencing pain [3]. Those with chronic medical conditions, such as diabetes, should take extra preventative steps in their foot care, since they are predisposed to many foot conditions. Even though tending to the health of one’s feet is not the first thought that comes to mind when thinking about living a healthy lifestyle, proper foot care and examination is a key standpoint to upholding a better standard of living.

The importance of maintaining healthy feet is not only palpable in the modern world. In Biblical times, there seems to have been much emphasis on the feet. During the times of King David (1002–970 BC), it is written that fifty men existed who had the soles

of their feet “carved out” [4]. Many scholars have attempted to interpret this phrase and most have come to the understanding that these men were members of the elite guard of David’s adversary, Adonijah [5]. In regards to these soldiers, Rashi (1040-1105) adds, “their soles were without flesh so that running on briars and thorns did them no harm” [4]. Even without the advancements of technology, medical professionals in the biblical era were able to comprehend the importance that the feet play during battle. They used the anatomy and mechanics of the foot and reconstructed it so that these men were able to run without tiring and become victorious. Undoubtedly, it is evident that even in this era the foot was recognized as significant and integral for the success of warfare.

King Asa, the third king of the house of Judah, ruled between 867-906 BCE. In the book of Kings I (15:23), it is said regarding King Asa that “in his old age his feet were crippled by disease.” Although many commentators have sought to discover the disease that afflicted King Asa, the true diagnosis is still a mystery. As noted in the text, Asa’s pain first developed throughout both his legs. The disease from which he suffered quickly advanced as he aged. Dr. L. Ben-Noun, a well-known scientific journalist, suggests that King Asa suffered from various foot pathologies, including gout, degenerative osteoarthritis, and peripheral vascular disease (PVD). Since PVD is frequently common in elderly males and is responsible for at least 95% of chronic leg ischemia, it is suggested that PVD was the most likely possible diagnosis for King Asa’s condition [6]. Asa’s illness eventually led to his death and downfall. While physicians of this era did not have the proper knowledge and technology to successfully treat King Asa for his podiatric disease, the application of podiatric medicine is illustrated, and furthermore, the importance of proper foot care is evident in the narration of Asa’s story.

Although the idea of foot health is not the first thought that comes to mind when attempting to lead a healthier lifestyle, healthy feet are fundamental to the quality of one’s life. Podiatric physicians are educated and certified to diagnose and treat a variety of conditions pertaining to the foot and lower extremities. Additionally, examples throughout history have demonstrated the important role that feet play in all aspects of life. Whether performing extensive surgery on warriors to reconstruct the anatomy of their feet or acting as the ruler of an empire while suffering from a painful foot disease, podiatric medicine has been relevant throughout time and continues to be significant in societal welfare today.

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