

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

MEDICAL HUMILITY AND GREEK MYTHOLOGY

We read with great interest the editorial published in January, 2018.¹ Humility is an underestimated principle in medical education, paediatric training and clinical practice, despite its great value and significance. What impressed us were the detailed references of cases exhibiting hybris, the ancient Greek concept, which is a term used in Greek mythology as the opposite of humility, reported in detail by Professor David Isaac. Prometheus, Tantalus, Arachne, Sisyphus; the list of cases exhibiting hybris is indeed endless. A case that should not be forgotten though, is the case of Asclepius (Fig. 1), the well-known doctor of ancient Greek mythology. Asclepius, who according to Homer, was a real historical figure, who became so powerful in his ability to heal the sick that he also could raise the dead.² However, this great achievement was against the will of the ancient Greek Gods. Concerned that no more spirits would descend to the underworld, its leader Hades complained about Asclepius to his brother Zeus, who responded by killing Asclepius with a thunderbolt.²

The cult of Asclepius is one of the most enduring of classical antiquities as hundreds of healing temples and sanctuaries dotted Greece – including Peloponnese, Crete and Euboea – Italy, the eastern Mediterranean and north Africa.³ The origin of the cult was thought to be at Epidaurus, from which it spread to new sites by the transport of one of the sacred serpents. Whatever we may think of the Asclepian cures, the testimonies evoke the healing qualities of the physician-god and the power of a personal bond with patients, the end of Asclepius' will to win death teaches us that we should never forget our human nature and the human nature of our science and become involved in superior acts against the natural laws.⁴ Clinical practice with humility is one of the greatest attributes to which any doctor should aspire.¹

Dr Ioannis N Mammias
Professor Demetrios A Spandidos
Department of Clinical Virology, School of Medicine
University of Crete
Heraklion
Greece

Conflict of interest: None declared.

References

- 1 Isaacs D. From humiliation to humility. *J. Paediatr. Child Health* 2018; **54**: 5–6.
- 2 Tsoilogiannis IN, Spandidos DA. *Asclepius Sanctuaries in Laconia*. Athens: Spandidos Publications; 2005.
- 3 Kellie SM. Cult of Asclepius. *Lancet* 1999; **354**: 1038.



Fig. 1 Asclepius. Lakedemonian Center of Civilization, Municipality of Sparta, Greece.

- 4 Savel RH, Munro CL. From Asclepius to Hippocrates: The art and science of healing. *Am. J. Crit. Care* 2015; **23**: 437–9.