Abstract

Western culture's demands of integrity, sacrifice, and compassion from its physician healers have roots in the mythic traditions of ancient Greece. By understanding these traditions, modern physicians can better understand their patients' expectations and the high expectations physicians often have for themselves. The mythic figure Asklepios was the focus of Greek and Roman medical tradition from approximately 1500 BC to 500 AD. As a physician-hero, Asklepios exemplified the ideal physician and the pitfalls he or she may face. With the progressive deification of Asklepios and the spread of his worship first in Greece and then in the Roman empire, Asklepios became generally recognized as the god of healing and served as an object of supplication, particularly for the poor and disregarded. Asklepian traditions for medical service provide historical insight into the role of modern physicians and their obligations to care for the underserved.