

Hippocrates and Childbirth

Hippocrates was a famed physician of the mid-5th century BCE this can be seen in Aristotle's mention of him being greater not as a man but "As a physician"¹ from this, we can presume that Hippocrates is a trusted source of information regarding abortion and contraception in ancient Athens.

Hippocrates work consists of the writings within his corpus Hippocraticum the focus here being within his *Nature of the Child*² the topic that will be broached is the subject of childbirth and the issues surrounding contraception specifically, in addition to features of the child itself the specific area that will be covered is contraception and how as long as there is no intent to abort a healthy infant then outside medication used by a woman then the resulting death of an infant would be considered either a miscarriage, or an effective means of contraceptive. The instance that will be covered is what is considered to be an acceptable circumstance where the use of contraception is to be allowed by the affected party.

Within the afore-mentioned work, *The Nature of the Child*, there is a segment in which Hippocrates brings up the issue of his relatives singing slave and how she by way of her relations with men requires a contraceptive measure. "The singing girl had heard what women say to one another, that when a woman is about to conceive, the seed does not run out of her, but remains inside. She understood what she heard and always paid attention, and when she one time noticed that the seed did not run out of her, she told her mistress, and the case came to me. When I heard I told her to spring up and down so as to kick her heels against her buttocks, and when she had sprung for the seventh time, the seed ran out on to the ground with a noise, and the girl on seeing it gazed at it and was amazed. How it looked I will recount: it was as if someone had remove the external shell of a raw egg, and the fluid part inside was visible through the internal membrane"²

From this, It can be determined that it was the owners choice that leads to the use of contraception or abortion, in addition to this it could be suggested that it was the husbands choice if it were the wife who wished to have a contraceptive based upon existing knowledge of the structure of an Oikos³. In opposition to the contraceptive and abortive route there are also situations where a woman will be infertile due to disease or other issues Hippocrates⁴ also provides remedies to these issues alongside the solutions to contraceptives. From this information, we can gather that women suffered a wide variety of problems when it came to childbirth and issues surrounding the reproductive organs of the women of the time which physicians like Hippocrates would have had to contend with alongside all the other known diseases to them, as a result survivability of the mother was more of an issue than the child as the resources required for a child to be brought up and maintained to a point where they can contribute to the society against a woman who has already gone through the process and is currently providing back to the economy.

From Hippocrates work,³ we can tell that contraception as a means of avoiding becoming pregnant is an acceptable practice within Athenian society if only to preserve the value of a slave or the wellbeing of an otherwise healthy woman.

474 words

¹ Arist. Pol. 1326a

² Hippoc. Nat. puer 1.3

³ Arist. Pol. 1235a

⁴ Hippoc. Nat. mul 305

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