

THE TREE OF HIPPOCRATES

Beside the drive leading to the United States National Library of Medicine (NLM) stands the Tree of Hippocrates. Given to the US by the people of the Greek island of Cos in the early 1960s, this tree was grown from a cutting from the very tree under which, as legend would have it, Hippocrates conducted his classes.

The library's links with medicine's history continue with its extraordinary collection of historical books. These include Vesalius' ground-breaking exposé of human anatomy (1543), Ambroise Paré's *magnus opus* on his surgical techniques and wisdom (1585), Harvey's revolutionary unravelling of the circulation (1628), Morgagni's clinicopathological observations that launched modern pathology (1761), and Jenner's seminal treatise on smallpox (1798). There are also works by Galen, Paracelsus, Boerhaave and Osler, among others.

To see, touch and read these original tomes is to connect with the growth of medical science and practice through the ages, and to reflect on the endeavours of physicians as their questioning moved from, *Who caused this illness?* to, *What is the illness, why does it occur and what can be done?*

Modern medicine's overwhelming preoccupation with these questions is mirrored in the sheer enormity of the NLM's immediate neighbour, the National Institutes of Health (NIH). NIH's Bethesda campus is a scientific metropolis of 19 institutes and seven centres, in which almost 6000 scientists work, supported by about 10% of the annual NIH budget of US\$28 billion!

Early this year, when visiting the NLM and standing by the Tree of Hippocrates, I could not help thinking how little medical history is treasured and taught in our medical schools, and how today's reductionistic style of medicine has diminished the holistic approach taught so long ago under a tree on the island of Cos.



Martin B Van Der Weyden

BOOK REVIEWS

- 266 **Hypertension**
reviewed by Roger Peverill
- 271 **Medical ethics manual**
reviewed by Wendy A Rogers
- 271 **The doctor in literature: satisfaction or resentment?**
reviewed by Marcia D Childress

-
- 226 **IN THIS ISSUE**
- 272 **IN OTHER JOURNALS**
- 279 **CHRISTMAS COMPETITION**



MJA Rapid Online Publication: denotes an article fast-tracked for online publication