



A change of logo - caduceus or 'Aesculapion'?

The original logo of the BSHM (above left) featured the caduceus, a symbol incorporating twin serpents entwined around a staff topped with wings. Several members pointed out that this was inappropriate as the caduceus was the rod of Hermes (Mercury), messenger of the gods, and had come to symbolise commerce rather than medicine. It was suggested that the more appropriate symbol was the rod of Aesculapius, the Greek god of healing, which featured a single serpent.

Fielding Garrison, the leading American medical historian, writing in 1919, traced the origin of the caduceus to Assyro-Babylonian culture. It was the symbol of the messenger of the mother goddess Ishtar and there was no specific association with medicine or healing.

In ancient Greek culture Aesculapius was the god of healing, and temples to him, Aesculapions, were built throughout the Greco-Roman world. He carried a simple staff entwined by a single snake and this became a symbol of medicine, which became popular again after the Renaissance. Aesculapius and his staff became associated only with medicine whereas the caduceus came to be associated with other trades and professions beside medicine.

Yet the caduceus came to have some connections with medicine. In 1556 John Caius presented a 'caduceus' to the Royal College of Physicians of London. This was, however, a silver sceptre topped by the arms of the College supported by four snakes and not the traditional rod of Hermes. That symbol was used in the 16th and 17th centuries by some European printers, but in the 18th century the English publisher John Churchill began to use the caduceus as a printer's mark. Churchill published mainly medical books, which sold well in the USA where the caduceus was adopted by other medical publishers and came to be associated with medicine in America.

Yet it was the Aesculapian rod which the then US Army Medical Department chose to incorporate into its coat of arms in 1818. The controversial adoption of the caduceus by the US Public Health Service, and especially by the US Army Medical Corps in 1902 saw its association with medicine enhanced in the early 20th century in the USA. In Britain the RAF medical and nursing services are amongst the very few medical organisations to have adopted the caduceus (and given that it features the wings of Hermes this seems an appropriate exception.)

The relative merits of the two symbols are still debated, but like most medical organisations the BSHM believes that the rod of Aesculapius has by far the more authentic claim and it now features in our new logo.

In 1999 Finn and colleagues suggested that popularity of the caduceus was because its name was more memorable and less cumbersome than the rod (or staff) of Aesculapius. They suggested the name 'Aesculapion'. Perhaps they had a point.

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