

Dokotela Nyoka

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It may well have been from the poison fang of the snake that the concept of the hypodermic needle and syringe developed, as has been debated before in this column (September 2017). Indeed snakes have long been associated with the healing profession and appear in many traditional designs of the badges and insignia of medical and dental organisations. An official emblem adopted by the American Dental Association in 1965 depicts the snake as a central theme. An enigmatic, perhaps even quixotic, association with teeth?

As with so many practices the relationship has its origin in Greek fables, for the snake was commonly used by ancient Greeks in healing rituals, also being allowed to crawl around amidst the sick and injured lying on the floor. The sacred snake was a constant companion to the Greek demi-god Asclepius, the god of Medicine, in fact a demi-god, as he was begotten as a liaison between the divine Apollo and a mortal woman. To his son, Apollo gave the gift of healing and the secret pharmacology of plants and herbs. Asclepius produced a wide family, two sons and four daughters and his descendants persevered in the art of healing... in fact the most famous of the "Asclepiads" is Hippocrates, he of the sworn Oath we all have taken.

Asclepius was worshipped at various sanctuaries, the most famous being Epidaurus. Amongst the impressive buildings was an underground labyrinth, thought to contain snakes. These intriguing creatures were held to symbolise regeneration as they were regarded as living both above and below ground, enabling them to know otherwise arcane secrets. Epidaurus has a 6000 seat amphitheatre, dating from 340 BCE, which is still in use today... but without the snakes!

And so the myth also reigns today with the healing professions recognising both Asclepius and the snake by incorporating a staff with the snake wrapped around, head at the top. This is the Rod of Asclepius. Of great relevance is that the snake is single... only one snake ascending the rod. Yes, a similar design has also survived from Greek mythology, but with two intertwined snakes on a short, winged rod... that is the Caduceus as carried by Hermes and is associated with commerce and negotiation... and also with printing.

Some medical and dental associations have (erroneously) used the Caduceus as their insignia, perhaps an unhappy choice for the healing and

altruistic professions, given that the symbol implies commerce rather than empathetic succour for the ill and suffering. A quick check of the badges and letterheads of the Specialist Societies of our Association revealed that only the Orthodontic Society included reptilian designs... and correctly, used only one snake around a long staff without wings! The Asclepius Rod. Well done SASO!

Local folklore also involves a snake in caring for people... Nyami Nyami is the affectionate name for the Zambezi River God... (full name Nyama yamaninga ninga... meaning "pieces of meat"). Nyami Nyami has the head of a fish... and the body of a snake! The River God is reputed to have resisted the construction of the Kariba Dam by causing enormous floods, the greatest for hundreds of years! The legend has it that in times of hunger the River God would bare his belly and offer the Tonga tribe pieces to savour. A caring snake indeed.

Now... let the imagination flow for a while and dissect the construct of the Asclepius Rod... could the coiling of the snake around the rod represent the vast complex of interwoven aspects of Dentistry, all ultimately related to the central theme of The Tooth, represented by the rod itself? The papers in the September issue of the Journal embody the breadth of healing encompassed by the practice of Dentistry.

Whilst the emphasis may be practical clinical dentistry, the role of the practitioner extends far beyond the confines of the oral cavity. Integral to every encounter with a patient is the commitment of the Dentist to be alert to the widest implications of the health status of his/her client. An awareness that the mysteries of whatever Dental Reptiles are encircling the tooth, they should be uncoiled.

