Medical Mythology: Horus

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Horus, the counterpart of the Greek god Apollo, was a major deity of ancient Egypt. Originally, he was god of the sky and was depicted as a falcon or falcon-headed man. He was the son of the Egyptian god Osiris and the earth goddess Isis.

Legend has it that when Osiris was king, he was murdered by Seth (a brother or son of Osiris), who became the ruler of the underworld. Seth was a composite creature, with a greyhound body, slanting eyes, square-tipped ears, and a long forked tail. Horus avenged his father and succeeded him as king.

In the battle with Seth, Horus was blinded by a shot of fire delivered by Seth and thus lost an eye. The restoration of the eye by Thoth, the god of learning, led to the superstition that the Eye of Horus was a talisman of good fortune. As a consequence, a talisman with the Eye of Horus became a popular charm in ancient Egypt. It was worn or carried and served as protection against ocular or other diseases.

The Eye of Horus was adopted by the Greeks and Arabs, finally becoming the familiar "Rx," which has been rendered by later generations as "recipe," meaning "take" [the following ingredients], as in a physician's prescription.

According to legend, Horus had four sons whom he appointed to guard the viscera of the dead that were placed in jars. The four sons became the divinities of death and the official protectors of viscera. The human-headed Imsety (with Isis) watched over the jar that contained the liver; the dog-headed Hapi (with Nephthys) guarded the lungs; the jackal-headed Duamutef (with Neith) protected the stomach; and the hawk-headed Qebhsnuf (with Selket) guarded the intestines. The head of each deity appeared on the lid of the jar.

Because of the legend about the loss of an eye by Horus in the battle with Seth, Horus has been of interest to ophthalmologists. Horus was featured on a stamp issued by Egypt in 1937 as part of a set of three stamps designed to publicize the Ophthalmological Congress held in Cairo in 1937.

CORRECTION

In the article by Wright and Wilkowske entitled "The Penicillins," which was published in the October 1991 issue of *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, the "β-lactam ring" was erroneously referred to as the "β-lactam*ase* ring" in three places: (1) line 7 of the abstract on page 1047; (2) page 1047, right column, line 13; and (3) page 1049, line 7 under "Bacterial Resistance."