

**Leventis London Event: Feb 27 2013.**

**‘Healthcare and Wellbeing: Can the Ancient Greeks help us?’. [1]**

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What I want to outline tonight is work being carried out in Classics and Ancient History at Exeter, with the aim of drawing out key insights from ancient medicine and philosophy that may help to promote healthcare and wellbeing in the modern world. We are faced with huge problems today in this area, with world-wide concern about rising levels of obesity and depression in every continent – problems that modern scientific medicine, despite its great achievements in other respects, is not well-equipped to address. This has led to a revived interest in preventive medicine and the importance of a healthy life-style in physical healthcare. It has also led to intensive use of different types of cognitive therapy – supplementing or replacing reliance on anti-depressant drugs. We think this is a good time to look back to ancient Greek and Roman medicine and philosophy and see if there are insights and practices that can be adopted or modified to help confront these urgent modern problems.

The emergence of the Classics Department at Exeter as a centre for ancient healthcare has arisen through a convergence of the research of John Wilkins on ancient food, nutrition and medicine, and my own work on ancient psychology and psychotherapy within Greek and Roman philosophy. [2] This work has been supported since 2004 by two post-doctoral fellows (funded by the Wellcome Trust), and postgraduate students. Former students in the Department (ref to alumni there tonight) now working in the Exeter area have been helpful in enabling us to make contact with people already working on preventive healthcare and lifestyle management. We have also had extensive discussions in recent years, through workshops and seminars, with other Exeter scholars in the Medical School and the Exeter Mood Disorders Centre who are addressing the problems of obesity and depression I mentioned earlier. A workshop on Stoicism and its modern uses held last October at Exeter [3] has initiated a very active collaboration between academics and psychotherapists interested in drawing on ancient philosophical ideas and practices to inform current practice in cognitive psychotherapy and in developing ‘life-guide’ strategies.

What – in broad terms – are the insights and methods that we think can usefully be applied to address modern problem and how do we propose to do this? It may be helpful here to outline two life-style trials that we carried out in 2012, one focused on ancient medical approaches to health and wellbeing, the other on Stoic (Greek philosophical) methods for living a more reflective and emotionally stable life. Patrick Ussher (a former MA student now working on a PhD on Stoicism at Exeter) has played a key role in setting up both of these trials and in examining their implications.

The first trial, ‘Living the Galenic Life’ [4] was based on the work *The Art of Preserving Health* by the second-century AD Greek doctor Galen, an important source for ancient ideas about what we would call ‘preventive medicine’, which John Wilkins has been studying intensively during the last academic year. The trial identified six factors as crucial for maintaining health. [5] These are: the food and drink you consume, getting the right amount and kind of exercise, living and working in an environment that is conducive for health and wellbeing, getting the right amount

of sleep, actively caring for your mental wellbeing, and (sixthly) achieving a balance between all these factors. Some of these factors may seem already familiar from UK government medical advice – we’ve all heard about eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day and about taking regular exercise – though we don’t all do this! But there are several aspects of the Galenic approach that we think can add usefully to current ideas. One is the holistic dimension: rather than just focusing on diet or exercise, Galen stresses the importance of integrating these factors with each other, and also recognising that each of these factors interacts with the others and that the overall aim is to achieve a proper balance between them. Another valuable insight is that (while we all want to be healthy) what health and wellbeing mean is a relative and to some extent individual matter, depending on age, social situation and so on – so healthcare cannot be a ‘one-size-fits-all’ matter.

In the case of each of these factors, Galen, in his work, explains more fully what is involved. For instance, as regards food, he thinks there are four primary aims of food: nourishment, health, strength and promoting length of life; and that we should use these to help us determine what we eat – though this does not mean we cannot enjoy tasty and interesting food! In considering physical activity, Galen does not focus solely on exercise (walking, running or swimming), but on breathing or respiration, bathing and massage. The aim is not just to carry out a fixed amount of daily exercise (which tends to be the message in modern healthcare advice) but to aim to give your life as a whole a natural rhythm of eating and drinking, activity and resting, waking and sleeping, in which each of these factors is given an appropriate place. The focus on achieving a balance between these various factors and on working out what this balance is for you means that Galenic healthcare is not a pre-packaged method and requires individual effort on our part. But it does not follow that Galenic healthcare is only possible for people with lots of time and leisure to devote to it. On the contrary, Galen (a ferociously busy man) saw it as providing the essential basis that can equip each of us with the right physical and mental state to live a full human life.

The Galenic life-style was followed by about 50 people (a mixture of students and others) in two weeks last February, followed up by questionnaires and workbooks. On all the measures used, such as cumulative physical and mental wellbeing and cumulative energy levels, a substantial majority of those who followed the trial registered a significant improvement [6]. A control group, who also used these measures but did not follow the Galenic trial, came out lower on all points. John Wilkins and Patrick Ussher have also used the method as a basis for working with volunteers in a ‘healthy community’ project linked with a health centre in the Exeter area and with a patients group who are working with the Exeter Medical school. The University of Exeter is now funding an extension of this work, involving collaboration between the Medical School and other groups in the university. [7] A questionnaire based on the Galenic approach is to be disseminated across the whole university and more widely; and there are further plans to use this method as the basis of trials conducted on a clinical, evidence-based approach with patients groups. We are very excited about this last development, which marks an important move towards making the Galenic method part of larger public discourse about healthcare – and we hope- making a positive, practical contribution to this pressing area of modern concern.

More recently, we have conducted a parallel trial, a ‘Live like a Stoic’ week. [8] This stemmed from a workshop held last autumn at Exeter [9], bringing together academics, psychotherapists and others interested in seeing how far the ancient Greek philosophy of Stoicism can be used to enhance modern practice in the areas of therapy and ‘guide to life’ writing. In fact, Stoic ideas have already been influential in shaping the early development of (what is now called) ‘cognitive’ psychotherapy; and Stoic writings in practical ethics have already been drawn on by some writers of popular writings on the search for happiness and guides to life (10). But we want to see whether this kind of work can be taken further by closer collaboration between scholars such as myself, researching Stoic ideas and writings from an academic standpoint, and those wanting to apply these ideas in more practical ways, in the areas of therapy or life-guides. I have been working especially on Epictetus’ *Discourses* (11) and Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, Stoic writings in practical ethics that lend themselves especially well to this kind of project.

‘Stoicism’ is mainly associated in most people’s minds with avoiding emotion, in particular with the idea of ‘the stiff upper lip’, that is, with putting up with disasters and failures in a calm state of mind. This stereotype has some basis in Stoic thinking; but there are better ways of bringing out the core Stoic ideas that can be helpful in this context. One theme is the importance of distinguishing between what is ‘up to us’ or ‘within our power’ (our thoughts, beliefs, actions, and so on) and what is ‘not up to us’, and focusing our attention and concern on the former rather than the latter. In any situation, there is much that we cannot determine; but there are also some things that are ‘up to us’, above all, how we react to that situation – what qualities we show, whether good or bad; and recognising that fact can have a crucial effect on how we respond to events, whether seemingly disastrous or not. A related theme is that what matters, above all, in human life, is the qualities we show in these reactions – as the Stoics put it, whether we express the virtues or not – rather than external circumstances such as economic wealth or social status. A further key theme is that we should aim to shape our lives with the overall objective of expressing these qualities (achieving what really matters), rather than focusing on external success. This is linked in turn with aiming to bring our emotional response in line with our ethical judgements, so that we respond to situations in the light of our beliefs about what really matters rather than reacting impetuously on the basis of superficial judgements.

The ‘Live like a Stoic Week’ I mentioned earlier (12) was the first collaborative effort of the group brought together in the Stoic workshop. We prepared a booklet offering guidance about how to live your life on Stoic principles. The guidance focused especially on exercises that people could undertake to promote a more reflective attitude to their lives: an early morning and bedtime reflection, for instance. Other exercises included taking the ‘view from above’ (trying to look at your situation from a more detached, even cosmic, perspective, and the ‘stripping method’ (designed to get to the ethical core of any given situation and to ‘strip away’ superficial or external considerations). Another exercise was what we called ‘cultivating philanthropy’, by aiming to expand the circle of those we are concerned with, working out from our family and friends to human beings as a whole. We also encouraged people to keep a philosophical journal, as Marcus Aurelius had done, noting down their reactions to the project of trying to live a Stoic life. We also encouraged people to post thoughts,

experiences, and even videos on the 'Stoicism today' blog set up for this purpose, reflecting on their responses to the project.

About 150 people embarked formally on the week, and we know that a good many others followed it via the blog or undertook it later on (two school groups, American and British did so). As with the Galenic trial, we invited people to fill up questionnaires on whether the week had proved beneficial or not; and the results were very positive, though with varying responses about which exercises were most useful or in which aspects they found the week most useful. (For instance, it proved more helpful in reducing distress at disturbing events than in promoting positive emotions.) Apart from those participating fully in the trial, the Stoic week aroused a remarkable degree of public interest, and stimulated three articles in the UK press (in the *Guardian* and *Independent*). (13) The blog we have set up has recorded 21,000 views in a few months, with world-wide interest especially in the USA. (14)

We propose to repeat the 'Live like a Stoic' week this autumn, and are preparing a fuller and more informative booklet. We aim to develop this booklet into a book or ebook which will enable people to use this as a resource on a more ongoing and independent basis. Another broader, medium or long-term goal is to develop a programme for CBT psychotherapy informed by Stoic ideas and practices. In recent years, therapists have had considerable success with therapy centred on what is called Mindfulness- which draws on Buddhist meditative practices though without requiring participants to sign up formally to Buddhist beliefs. What we have in mind is developing something similar as regards Stoic-style therapy: exactly how much Stoicism can be built into this therapy is a question that is currently being actively debated within the group.

In this talk, I have brought out two of the ways in which we have tried in the Classics Department at Exeter to explore ways in which our research into ancient Greek and Roman culture can offer insights which can be put to practical use under modern conditions, in a way that can help to address pressing current concerns about physical and mental wellbeing. Most of our work in the Department, of course, is centred on bringing out in our research and teaching the inherent interest and significance of ancient Greek and Roman culture – including its impact within antiquity, as outlined at the start of the evening. But I have also tried to show some of the ways in which we are also aiming to show the potential impact of Greek culture in the world we live in now - an area with much more scope than has yet been explored.

