Free article

THE HISTORY OF DENTISTRY IN ANCIENT EGYPT

The ancient Egyptian civilization, one of the world’s first great cultural awakenings, stirs the popular imagination and today it holds an enduring fascination for many people. Developing from prehistoric origins, Egypt unified around 3100 BC into a single state, and then survived for over 3,000 years. A few of these ancient Egyptians involved in this struggle are known to us today, but the vast silent majority who created and sustained this spectacular culture are not. We know something about the society they lived in, but what do we know about their health and, in particular, their dental health? Let’s first start with those anonymous people who have enriched the ancient Egyptian civilization and especially the health aspect of it.

The first dentist in human history (HESY-RA):

Dentistry at that time was crude by today’s standards; HESY-RA often drilled holes in teeth to help drain the infection, or so the story goes. The drilling, however, paved the way for advanced dental techniques such as root canal therapy, in which the dentist has to drill all the way through the teeth to treat the abscess.

What about the Dental Health in Ancient Egypt?

In ancient Egypt, the dry climate together with their unique burial customs resulted in the survival of large numbers of well-preserved skeletal and mummified remains. Extensive examinations of these remains have demonstrated the many pathological and non-pathological conditions seen in the dentitions of these ancient people. This, together with the surviving documentary, archaeological and ethnographic evidence has enabled a detailed picture of their dental health to be revealed; more so than perhaps for any other civilization in antiquity.

The conclusions from these surveys suggest that far from having healthy dentitions the ancient Egyptians suffered from extremely worn teeth, periodontal problems and numerous dental abscesses. Significantly, these disorders were not only experienced by the peasants—the overwhelming majority of the population—but also by the pharaohs and the elite of society.

The most frequent pathological condition identified was that of excessive tooth wear, a condition so widespread that it was found in most of the ancient Egyptian skulls throughout the dynastic period. A study of 4,800 ancient Egyptian teeth, found that nearly 90% of the teeth showed some evidence of tooth wear. This disorder has often been categorized as attrition, but analysis of the problem reveals that attrition was not the sole agent responsible for the loss of tooth tissue. Contamination of the food by significant numbers of inorganic particles resulted in an additional element of abrasion.

Finally, the strange sayings on that subject are one of the causes of death of the queen of Egypt Hatshepsut—She is generally regarded by Egyptologists as one of the most successful pharaohs reigning longer than any other woman of an indigenous Egyptian dynasty which had an abscessed tooth that was pulled. She died in excruciating pain from an infected tooth at the age of 50.