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A tale of three serpents

The Caduceus, the Rod of Asclepius and the truth over the symbol of medicine

Much has been written about the Caduceus, a symbol whose image has travelled through ancient cultures from the Babylonians to the Romans to the present day. You know the one: the twin snakes curling symmetrically around the winged staff. It is widely associated with medicine—an association that is completely and totally wrong. You see, the reason so much has been written about the Caduceus as a symbol of medicine is that the Caduceus is not a symbol of medicine at all.

To understand how the confusion occurred, you need to go back about 3,000 years, to the Bronze Age of ancient Greece, where you'll find the origins of the actual symbol of medicine: The Rod of Asclepius.

Asclepius was a possibly real but deified figure of the ancient Greek world. In mythology, he was the son of Apollo ("the physician") and a woman named Coronis. According to an excellent history by Dr. Timothy Leigh Rogers, after being impregnated by Apollo, Coronis ran off with a mortal man, and in his fury, Apollo killed her. As she lay dying on a funeral pyre, Apollo saved their child, delivering him in the world's first Cesarean section.

Later in life, Asclepius was called to heal the young prince of Crete, Glaucus, who had fallen ill. When he was unable to, the king locked him in a prison where a snake slithered into his cell.

The snake is one of the most prominent symbols in all of mythology, and its connection to medicine predates the ancient Greeks. Venom had the power to kill while antivenom had the power to revive. The ability to shed its skin was thought to signify rejuvenation and new life.

Wisdom is perhaps the characteristic most often associated with the serpent, which elevated it above the rest of the animal kingdom toward the divine. But the snake is also a symbol of deceitfulness and evil.

In some tellings, Ascelpius did it out of disgust; in others, out of thoughtlessness. Whatever his reasons, Asclepius bludgeoned the snake to death with his staff. A second snake followed, carrying a leaf that it laid over the body of the first, bringing the snake back to life. In his reverence, Asclepius took the leaf and used it to heal Glaucus.

After that, Asclepius's legend grew. He was rumoured to have been able to raise the dead, an ability that cost him his life when Zeus struck him dead for upsetting the natural order of things. In Roman myth, Jupiter (Zeus) appeased Apollo by placing Ascelpius's image in the heavens as the constellation Ophiuchus, the serpent-bearer.

Healing temples called "asclepion" spread across the ancient world, where non-venomous snakes as long as six feet slithered freely over and around the ailing. Some of the most famous physicians in history, from Hippocrates to Galen, considered themselves students—or in the case of Hippocrates, a descendent—of Asclepius. A simple rod encircled by a single snake became the universal symbol of healing, which it remains today.

So, why the confusion? Despite the visual similarities, the Caduceus has different roots and meaning. It is the insignia of Hermes, god of gamblers and thieves, of messengers and commerce. It was also, as is often the case with the variegated personalities of the Greek pantheon, a symbol for peace.

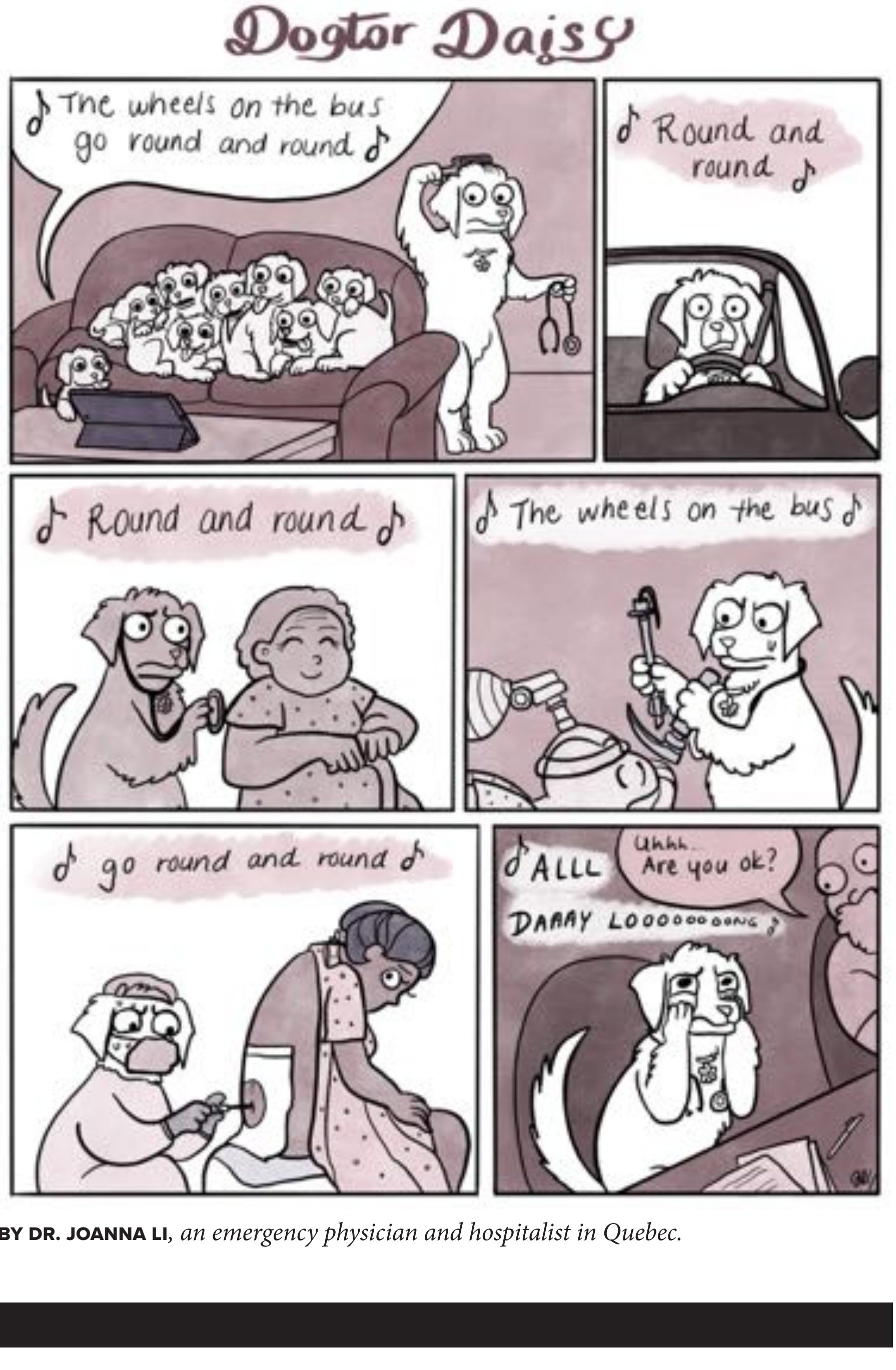
The Caduceus's association with medicine can be traced to the United States in 1902, when the U.S. Surgeon General adopted it as its coat of arms. It's unclear why exactly this happened or why the error was never corrected, but Dr. Rogers gives a compelling explanation for *how* it may have happened.

In the 17th century, the Caduceus was used as a printer's mark on published materials. Printers were, after all, the disseminators of information, the messengers of their day. Some medical publishers also used the mark, creating the initial conditions for the mixup. Dr. Rogers also pointed out that in battle the Caduceus was used as a symbol of neutrality as early as the Roman era. Stretcher-bearers and other non-combatants often wore it to avoid being assaulted. So too did medical personnel.

The insignia made its way into other military imagery, such as medals and peace treaties, but the definitive moment where the connection between the Caduceus and medicine became official came with the Surgeon General's decision in 1902. Since then, many scholars have written about the historical error, but the true difference has become marginalia for the frustrated, a distinction that few outside the medical profession know or recognize. As one doctor put it, "(Hermes') emblem would seem more appropriate on a hearse than on a physician's car."

The misapplication of the symbol appears to be a distinctly American phenomenon. A 1992 survey of 242 logos for U.S. health or medical organizations found that the Caduceus and the Rod of Asclepius were used almost interchangeably, including at 63% of the surveyed hospitals. Aptly, medical organizations with more of a "commercial focus" were more likely to use the Caduceus than the Rod. Some doctors have even suggested that the Caduceus has, perversely, become a fitting emblem—an allegory for modern American medicine.

"Escorting the souls of the dead, wisdom, fertility, commerce, luck, eloquence, cheating and thieving," writes Dr. Luke Van Orden in *Where Have all the Healers Gone? A Doctor's Recovery Journey*. "These have become symbolic of how medicine evolved in the late 20th century." **—TRISTAN BRONCA**


Dogtor Daisy
♪ The wheels on the bus go round and round ♪
♪ Round and round ♪
♪ Round and round ♪
♪ The wheels on the bus ♪
♪ go round and round ♪
♪ ALLL
Uhhh.. Are you ok?
DAAAY LOOOOOOOOONG ♪

BY DR. JOANNA LI, *an emergency physician and hospitalist in Quebec.*