

The Snake as a Medical Symbol on Stamps By Roy W. Rings

Practically all stamp collectors have encountered an illustration of a snake wrapped around a rod in their stamp catalogue when searching for catalogue numbers, issue dates or other information. If they are trying to identify a different stamp they probably don't notice that there is a single snake in one version and two snakes in the other. Both illustrations are symbols of the science of medicine.



Figure 1

The symbol with just one stylized snake coiled around a rod is known as the Staff of Aesculapius (See Fig. 1). This symbol is a roughhewn cypress branch entwined by a single snake, two elements common to the native home of Aesculapius in the Greek isles. The snake associated with Aesculapius is a common reptile widely distributed in central and southern Europe known as the Aesculapian Snake, *Elaphe longissima*. Isolated populations of this species which exist in Germany and Switzerland are descendents of specimens brought to health resorts there by the Romans. This serpent may be found on stamps of Benin # 1170, Bulgaria #3492, and Moldova #72.



Figure 2

According to Greek mythology, Apollo, the God of Health, had a love affair with the mortal woman Coronis. Some time later he found out that she had been unfaithful and he had her slain with arrows only to discover that she was pregnant with his child. As Coronis lay on her funeral pyre, Hermes served as the obstetrician and delivered the infant Aesculapius. The newly born demigod Aesculapius was then taken and trained by the Chirion, the healing-wise centaur. It is Aesculapius who then became the god of medicine and it is his staff which properly represents the physician. In spite of the mythical story of his birth, Aesculapius was mentioned in the writings of Homer as a mortal physician hero who performed miraculous acts of healing on the battlefield. Later, Aesculapius was awarded a divine position as the god of medicine. His descendents and other followers worshipped their new god and formed the cult of Asklepios. The cult spread throughout the Mediterranean and by the fourth century B. c., over 500 Aesculapian temples served as medical centers equally devoted to healing as to the worship of their god. Hippocrates himself, the embodiment of the ideal physician, was educated as a member of the 20th generation of the cult of Aesculapius. One of Aesculapius's daughters, Hygieia lovingly tended the harmless snakes kept in the cult temples and later became the Greek goddess of healing. Hygieia appears on the Greek stamp #935. Another daughter, Panacea, the basis for the current term for "all-healing", was the personification of healing through herbs.

The Staff of Aesculapius has been accepted as the official symbol of the World Health Organization, the World Medical Association, the American Medical Association, the British Medical Association, the Australian Medical Association and a great number of other medical associations throughout the world.

The snake was revered in much of ancient society compared with today's repulsion of these reptiles by the majority. Snakes were held sacred by Aesculapius and he himself was thought to sometimes appear in the form of a snake. In Greek mythology snakes had a reputation for wisdom and were believed to have the powers of regeneration due to their ability to change their skins periodically.



Figure 3

The caduceus (Figure 3) was worn, or displayed by Roman surgeons, official messengers, and by military emissaries to signify a cessation of hostilities on the battlefield. It symbolized the herald of the gods, as well - Mercury in Rome and Hermes in Greece - who carried a winged wand on which were shown two serpents symbolizing male and female. The legend was that Hermes came upon two serpents fighting and, in his beguiling manner, placed a staff, which Aesculapius had given him, between them which caused the reptiles to cease their quarrel and begin to love each other.

While Hermes was sometimes associated with more roguish elements, in the third century, along with being the guardian of health, he became to be connected with theology and philosophy. Later, in the 16th century chemistry, pharmacy and medicine came under his domain as well even though he was not a physician. In 2,000 B. C. records indicate the physician to the Sumerian King used the symbol of a staff entwined with two serpents. In 1856, it was selected as the emblem of the United States Marine Hospital Service, and in 1871 the Public Health Service, the United States Army Medical Corps in 1902, then the Dental Corps, Veterinary Corps, Army Nursing Corps and the Sanitary Corps. I was privileged to wear the Sanitary Corps Insignia in 1943 as a First Lieutenant while serving as an Army Entomologist. A few years later the organization and the insignia was changed to the Medical Administrative Service Corps to accommodate other paramedical and hospital administrative officers. The caduceus was chosen as the emblem for the Cancer Medical Association, the Ceylon Medical School, the Institute of Medical Health, the Australian Flying Doctor's Service, and the Stomatology Academy, all of which are shown on postage stamps.

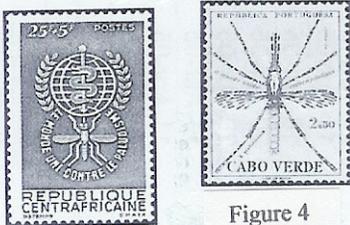


Figure 4

Forty-three years ago, the nations of the world embarked on a worldwide effort to eradicate the protozoon parasites that cause malaria. Armed with DDT, the miracle insecticide, the chances for success were thought to be excellent. The program was widely publicized in the press and by the issue of postage stamps by many countries known as the anti-malaria issues. Two designs are shown here (Figure 4). Unfortunately the effort ended in failure 17 years later. Originally, it was believed that given enough insecticide,

medicine and money, the parasite could be eliminated from the earth. It gradually became apparent that the strength of the parasite to survive and continue causing disease in human hosts had been grossly miscalculated. Although malaria was eradicated from the United States it continues to cause illness and millions of deaths in great countries such as China and India.

