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Cultivating Belief: How Asclepius and His Cult Utilized Optimism to Enhance Healing

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ABSTRACT

This paper frames the Cult of Asclepius not as a passive facilitator of the placebo effect but rather as a conscious and strategically focused architect of patient belief. Referencing evidence from both the testimonies collected by Ludwig Edelstein and recent work by scholars like Olympia Panagiotidou and Lidia Oarowska, it is proposed that the cult's various techniques and rituals, including votive tablets, induced dream-visions, incubation, and gifts after healing, constitute an intentionally designed mechanism to foster patient optimism and belief in success during treatment. Patient testimonies are not analyzed for accuracy but rather treated as evidence of a real psychological phenomenon being described: that the deliberate cultivation of hope can improve patient outcomes. All three stages of the healing process – pre-treatment, treatment period, and recovery – will be evaluated for the strategies the cult used towards facilitating optimism and converting non-believers. The paper will conclude by contextualizing these ancient therapeutic methods within contemporary studies on the demonstrable effects of optimism on physical health, including results from meta-analytic research establishing a positive correlation between dispositional optimism and health indicators. By positioning the Cult of Asclepius as an intentional strategist in optimizing belief, the study suggests that members of the Asclepius Cult grasped, via religious intuition rather than empirical inquiry, a psychological process that current medicine confirms with data: the power of hope.

Keywords: *Asclepius, placebo effect, optimism, ancient medicine, incubation, votive offerings, religious healing, patient belief, mind-body medicine, health psychology*

Asclepius (900 BCE), the Greek god of medicine and healing, is often considered one of the world's greatest practitioners of medicine. While alive, he was rumored to have restored sight to the blind, returned motion in a paraplegic's legs, caused a woman to conceive, fixed a crippled foot, ended a man's constant headaches, and far more. No medical issue was too advanced for Asclepius. He did the impossible and healed those who had no hope for recovery. At his instruction, temples were constructed as havens of medicine in places like Argos and Epidaurus, and the baths on their grounds were used to purify and cleanse people. Asclepius' followers became known as the Cult of Asclepius. Those who sought healing would visit one of the temples to receive it from him and his cult. Even after death, Asclepius' legacy lived on.

Asclepius' methods, both as a mortal and as a god, varied. He operated on some patients to remove growths. Others he simply touched, and their health was restored. Patients also routinely underwent rituals where they prayed with priests. In addition, each patient was required to undergo incubation, a ritual practice in which they slept within a sacred space to receive a divinely guided dream; in this case, the desired vision was an encounter with Asclepius himself, who would reveal the appropriate treatment (Kapotsis et al., 2025, p. 31). In return for being treated, many patients were required to give gifts to the cult, including plaques or pigs made of silver.

While patients' experiences differed, the goal was the same. The Cult of Asclepius aimed to instill faith, hope, optimism, and belief in Asclepius. Through this intentional inculcation, Asclepius enhanced his ability to heal and created better outcomes for his patients. Today, scientific research has confirmed what Asclepius knew so many years ago: the power of mindset in medicine. This essay will first explore Asclepius' healing practices, then delve into how he cultivated and instilled belief, and finally show that Asclepius and his cult utilized optimism as a tool to perform his medical miracles, an approach that scientific studies confirm has a tangible impact on patient outcomes.

It is unknown whether Asclepius was purely a mythological figure or a legendary physician later mythologized; either way, no independent historical record corroborates any individual cure. The testimonies collected by Edelstein and Edelstein that will be referenced several times in this paper are cult-authored or cult-curated texts, devotional and promotional in function rather than clinical in intent. This paper does not claim these cures happened as described; it argues that the rituals described, real or invented, model a psychological mechanism (optimism/placebo) that modern research can independently verify works, regardless of whether Asclepius himself ever existed.

BLENDING MEDICINE AND MIRACLE: THE PRACTICES OF ASCLEPIUS

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According to myth, Asclepius was the son of the god Apollo and the human Triccaean princess Coronis. His mortal mother died in labor, which forced Apollo to cut the unborn child from the womb. As a result, ancient tradition says he got his name “Asklepios,” meaning “to cut open.” Asclepius was later trained by the centaur Chiron in the field of medicine. Eventually, Asclepius grew so skilled that he was able to revive dead people and even grant immortality. These were crimes against the natural order, so Zeus, the Greek god of lightning, struck him dead with a lightning bolt. After Asclepius’ death, he was placed among the stars and made a god of healing (“Asklepios,” n.d.).

SURGICAL INTERVENTION

As both a mortal and a god, Asclepius’ healing practices combined physical medicine, divine intervention, and carefully structured rituals to form a holistic system in which patients experienced both medical treatment and spiritual renewal. In some ways, his healing methods were not far from those used in modern medicine. While it is hard to imagine doctors from thousands of years ago performing surgery, Ancient Greeks did just that, and Asclepius was widely believed to be one of the best surgeons of the time (Apollodorus, 1921).

In *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, Edelstein and Edelstein (1945) closely document inscriptions from real patients in Asclepian temples. In one entry, a patient recounts their surgical experience in this plaque:

A man with an abscess within his abdomen. When asleep in the Temple he had a dream. It seemed to him that the god ordered the servants who accompanied him to grip him and hold him tightly so that he could cut open his abdomen. The man tried to get away, but they gripped him and bound him to a door knocker. Thereupon Asclepius cut his belly open, removed the abscess, and, after having stitched him up again, released him from his bonds. Whereupon he walked out sound, but the floor of the Abaton was covered with blood. (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 235)

While we have limited information from this first-hand account of a patient’s healing at the temple, we can glean a few details. First, the patient was healed by the Cult of Asclepius, which was formed to act as a mortal bridge between Asclepius’ divine healing and his patients. In addition, the inscription presents surgery as having been performed using a cutting instrument, whether by a scalpel as we know it today or an ordinary knife, and an incision is made into the man’s “belly.” We also know that Asclepius then removes an abscess from inside, similar to how surgeons remove tumors today. Because the term “abscess” lacks diagnostic specificity, it is impossible to determine whether the lesion Asclepius removed was cancerous, as ancient medical descriptions do not allow for such distinctions. Finally, Asclepius stitches the patient up. Again, few details are provided as to how the suturing was done. Was it with an ordinary needle and thread? While the testimony frames this as a dream, it includes a detail that pulls against that framing: blood left on the floor of the Abaton. Whether or not

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the event occurred as described, this detail is itself significant; it shows the cult's testimonies were composed to blur the line between vision and physical event, reinforcing for readers that the dream-healing had a bodily reality.

PHARMACOLOGICAL TREATMENT

Furthermore, Asclepius often used drugs and medicinal remedies for healing to avoid invasive procedures. It may sound far-fetched to equate a doctor today who prescribes drugs that were developed in laboratories using the empirical method with an Ancient Greek doctor from thousands of years ago. And yet, Asclepius had powerful treatments to perform medical miracles, such as restoring eyesight:

A man came...to the god. He was so blind that of one of his eyes he had only the eyelids left—within them was nothing, but they were entirely empty... As he slept, a vision appeared to him. It seemed to him that [Asclepius] prepared some drug, then, opening his eyelids, poured it into them.... he departed with the sight of both eyes restored. (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, pp. 231–232)

The observer of this incident describes a man so blind that he has an empty eye socket, but Asclepius pours a drug into the man's eye socket, and he can see again. There are no further details. The healing is described as having occurred in a dream and yielding real results; the patient can see once again. And this event does not just happen once. There are multiple accounts of other people who received almost the exact same healing: "Ambrosia of Athens, blind of one eye... In her sleep she had a vision. It seemed to her that the god stood by her and said that he would cure her... After saying this, he cut the diseased eyeball and poured in some drug. When day came she walked out sound" (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 230).

A man named Timon has a less invasive treatment that yields the same results: "Timon . . . wounded by a spear under his eye. While sleeping in the Temple he saw a dream. It seemed to him that the god rubbed down an herb and poured it into his eye. And he became well" (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 237).

Valerius Aper was given a medicine to take at home, rather than being cured at the temple: "To Valerius Aper, a blind soldier, the god revealed that he should go and take the blood of a white cock along with honey and compound an eye salve and for three days should apply it to his eyes. And he could see again and went and publicly offered thanks to the god" (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 251). Different authors recount nearly the exact same procedure on different people with the exact same result. As miraculous as these accounts sound, their repetition across multiple testimonies is itself notable: whether or not any single cure occurred, the consistency of the pattern suggests a deliberate narrative template the cult used to standardize what a "successful healing" looked like. In the last anecdote, the drug is noted to come from natural ingredients. While it seems unlikely that any medicine could be this efficacious, similar stories make it easier to believe that some type of healing genuinely took place.

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DIVINE TOUCH AND SACRED ANIMALS

Finally, Asclepius often used unorthodox methods to treat patients, including methods as basic as simply touching a person: “Andromache of Epeirus, for the sake of offspring. She slept in the Temple and saw a dream. It seemed to her that a handsome boy uncovered her, after that the god touched her with his hand, whereupon a son was born to Andromache from Arybbas” (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 235). Furthermore, Asclepius was a doctor of all specialties. He did not just use drugs and procedures but also his “divine powers.” In granting an infertile person a baby, he was essentially creating life through his power of touch. This method is the least medical and the most difficult to interpret. Its recurrence across multiple testimonies, however, shows how central the *idea* of direct divine contact was to the cult’s model of healing, even where no physical intervention is described at all.

There are other examples of Asclepius using his god-like powers to treat his patients. In one case, he cures a blind man by simply prying open the patient’s eyes: “Alcetas of Halieis. This blind man saw a dream. It seemed to him that the god came up to him and with his fingers opened his eyes, and that he first saw the trees in the sanctuary. At daybreak he walked out sound” (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 233).

Asclepius also used “sacred dogs” as a tool to cure patients: “A dog cured a boy from Aegina. He had a growth on the neck. When he had come to the god, one of the sacred dogs healed him—while he was awake—with its tongue and made him well” (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 234). In both instances, healing powers are used rather than science. For example, dogs were sacred creatures to Asclepius, and the saliva on their tongues was believed to possess magical healing properties. Today, these miraculous results are inexplicable. How can a man cure every possible medical issue that comes to him with only primitive medicine? The answer to that question becomes clearer when examining not just the actual healing but what happens before and after it.

VISUAL CUES AND RITUALS AS TOOLS FOR STRENGTHENING FAITH AND READINESS FOR CURE

Asclepius and his cult used many tools, including stone tablets with positive reviews, induced religious experiences, and incubation, as methods to instill belief in his patients before their actual healing. As such, the Cult of Asclepius did not accept patients and immediately heal them. Rather, patients were required to undergo a long process before being healed. Before the final step of incubation, where one would be placed in a dream state to prepare for being healed by Asclepius, a patient had to go through many rituals. These rituals ensured that the patient believed in Asclepius’ healing powers.

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VOTIVE TABLETS

Prior to a patient even entering the temple of Asclepius, they waited in an area with dozens of plaques. These plaques shared accounts of previous patients' positive experiences with Asclepius and how he performed medical miracles on them. Cleo, for example, was a patient who had been pregnant for five years. After Asclepius helped her give birth, in return for this favor she inscribed on her offering: "Admirable is not the greatness of the tablet, but the Divinity in that Cleo carried the burden in her womb for five years, until she slept in the Temple and He made her sound" (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 229). The offering the author speaks of is a tablet, similar to a review on the internet, that she gifted the Cult of Asclepius to display in their temple. These tablets were placed in front of the temple so that people would believe in Asclepius before even seeing him.

A man whose fingers, with the exception of one, were paralyzed, came as a supplicant to the god. While looking at the tablets in the temple he expressed incredulity regarding the cures and scoffed at the inscriptions. When he had straightened them all, the god asked him if he would still be incredulous of the inscriptions on the tablets in the Temple, and he answered that he would not (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 230).

When the man first sees the tablets, the Cult of Asclepius fails to convince him that Asclepius performed miracles. However, Asclepius makes his intentions clear about the tablets when he asks at the end of the successful treatment if the man now believes the tablet. By doing so, Asclepius shows that he wants people to believe them. He wants people to see these stories and truly have faith that they will be healed. Panagiotidou (2016) agrees with this assertion, noting that the inscriptions were presented as individual dedications of patients who had visited the sanctuaries and had personal experiences of healing, and that by naming real people and places, the narratives gave newcomers reasons to hope in recovery (p. 84).

Studies today confirm the powerful effect this display of tablets may have had on a patient's psyche. In a 2024 study conducted by researchers in Bogota, Colombia, researchers found a strong, linear, and positive relationship between the quality of information in reviews and the degree of trust placed in reviews, marketplaces, and reputation systems more broadly (Peña-García et al., 2024, p. 8).

It is important to note that these tablets were not neutral medical records, but rather curated testimonials. By displaying only successful outcomes, the Cult created what we would now call a 'survivorship bias' that convinced incoming patients that failure was not an option. The tablets functioned as a visual promise, transforming the temple walls into a marketing gallery that silenced doubt before the patient even met the physician. They were not unlike the Best Doctor plaques that many physicians today are awarded and display in their waiting rooms.

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INDUCED DREAMS

In addition to using inscribed tablets to bolster his healing power claims, Asclepius also induced religious experiences in patients as a way to quiet doubt and reinforce faith. Before any healing took place, patients were required to sleep in the temple, where many reported dreams in which Asclepius directly confronted them. These dreams were not primarily curative; rather, they functioned as moral tests. Patients who hesitated, expressed fear, or lacked faith were scolded, mocked, or challenged by the god in their visions.

Cleimenes of Argus, paralyzed in body. He came to the Abaton and slept there and saw a vision. It seemed to him that the god wound a red woolen fillet around his body and led him for a bath a short distance away from the Temple to a lake of which the water was exceedingly cold. When he behaved in a cowardly way Asclepius said he would not heal those people who were too cowardly for that, but those who came to him into his Temple, full of hope that he would do no harm to such a man, but would send him away well. When he woke up he took a bath and walked out unhurt. (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, pp. 236–237)

He came as a suppliant to the sanctuary on a stretcher. In his sleep he saw a vision. It seemed to him that the god broke his crutch and ordered him to go and get a ladder and to climb as high as possible up to the top of the sanctuary. The man tried it at first, then, however, lost his courage and rested up on the cornice; finally he gave up and climbed down the ladder little by little. Asclepius at first was angry about the deed, then he laughed at him because he was such a coward. He dared to carry it out after it had become daytime and walked out unhurt. (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 236)

Both patients met with Asclepius in a dream, and both were scolded for being cowards. They feared what Asclepius told them to do and did not trust that he knew what was best for them. Some may argue that Asclepius had no role in these dreams and that they were merely hallucinations. However, Asclepius' method of healing frequently involved inciting dreams after patients were placed in a specific setting during their stay. Kapotsis et al. (2025) describe how, entering the quiet and dark environment of the sanctuary, patients lay on a mat and were isolated from the outside world, expecting Asclepius to visit them in their sleep and either carry out treatment immediately or recommend treatments to be followed faithfully after waking (p. 32).

Patients were expected to dream of Asclepius, but how they would see him was up to them. Asclepius and his cult's role was to constantly remind the patient that without faith there would be no healing, after which they placed the patients in a room to see Asclepius. By doing so, the cult intentionally tried to tap into a patient's subconscious mind because Asclepius wanted his patients to believe in him. Those who didn't believe in Asclepius' powers would dream of being shamed by him. By ensuring that all his patients had faith, Asclepius achieved better health outcomes for them.

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INCUBATION

Incubation, the final step before the actual healing, was more than Asclepius inciting religious dreams in his patients as in the previous step. It was the formal ritual through which healing was believed to occur. Patients were deliberately placed in a quiet, dark, and isolated environment and instructed to sleep for a second time, fully expecting Asclepius to visit and perform the healing on them. As Kapotsis et al. (2025) explain, the most important component of incubation was dreaming, since it was believed that the soul, during sleep and especially in dreams, left the body and rose to greater levels of existence where it could communicate with divine spirits (p. 32). The goal of incubation was to ensure the patient believed that they were going to be healed on a divine level. After all, many of the issues seemed untreatable. For example, a man whose fingers, with the exception of one, were paralyzed, came as a suppliant to the god, and while looking at the tablets in the temple, expressed incredulity regarding the cures and scoffed at the inscriptions (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 230). It seemed impossible to people like this man that someone could perform miracles such as restoring feeling to a paralyzed hand. By incubating patients during their treatment, the Cult of Asclepius implied that they were not receiving treatment from a mere mortal but from a divine god, so the methods were not limited to the knowledge and tools of mortal medicine. Instead, the patients entered a state where they could talk to the gods. The whole process of incubation was used to make patients truly feel as if they were going to be treated by a god, and this manipulation of the mind gave patients more hope for success. Even after treatment, however, Asclepius ensured that patients' faith in him remained, which led to a more permanent and lasting healing.

GIFTS AS A PROOF OF FAITH

The healing process for those who visited an Asclepius sanctuary did not stop after they left. Instead, it was an ongoing process meant to produce the best possible recovery and clinical outcome. After being healed, patients were often instructed to give gifts to the sanctuary that healed them. For example, Hermodicus of Lampsacus, paralyzed in body, was healed by the god while sleeping in the Temple and was ordered upon leaving to bring to the Temple as large a stone as he could carry; the stone he brought still lies before the Abaton (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, pp. 232–233). A payment would usually involve money, coins, or valuable metals such as gold or silver, but Hermodicus' gift is a symbol of what Asclepius has done for him. While in some instances, gifts were used as payment for their healing, similar to the system we have today, in others, it was meant to ensure that the patients' belief in Asclepius continued outside of the temple. Hermodicus was completely paralyzed before he came to the sanctuary. He could not move a limb, much less a large stone. Because of Asclepius, he was now able to perform acts such as moving a large stone, like the one he gave to the Cult. Another example of a gift being given as a symbol of Asclepius' power involves a porter and his goblet:

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A porter, upon going up to the Temple, fell when he was near the ten-stadia stone. When he had gotten up he opened his bag and looked at the broken vessels... When he got (to the Temple) he opened the bag and brought the goblet out of it, and it was entirely whole; and he related to his master what had happened and had been said; when he [the master] heard that, he dedicated the goblet to the god. (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 232)

Again, Asclepius instructs a man to give a gift, inexpensive, but symbolic to him, a gift showing that his immense power allowed him to fix a seemingly unrepairable goblet. The purpose of these symbolic gifts is clear: to encourage the patients to maintain faith throughout the recovery process. Hsu et al. (2008) describe healing as a process and a journey in which there will sometimes be “two steps forward and one step back,” but it is the journey itself that helps people continue moving forward (p. 310). Likewise, the process of healing doesn’t stop, even after visiting Asclepius. Patients must take time to recover so that they may achieve the best possible medical outcome. By ensuring that his patients believe in his healing power, even after treating them, he ensures that they continue to believe during their recovery.

One final example of a patient required to give a gift to Asclepius is Ambrosia of Athens, who came as a suppliant to the god and, as she walked about the Temple, laughed at some of the cures as incredible and impossible—that the lame and the blind should be healed merely by seeing a dream. In her sleep she had a vision in which the god told her he would cure her, but that in payment he would ask her to dedicate to the Temple a silver pig as a memorial of her ignorance (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 230). Ambrosia of Athens was different from the other patients required to give gifts to Asclepius: she was a nonbeliever. Asclepius dealt with nonbelievers by requiring them to give gifts, along with other methods.

ENGAGING NONBELIEVERS AND ERASING SKEPTICISM

Despite everything Asclepius and his cult did to spread knowledge of his immense power, not everybody believed what they saw or heard. Some openly scoffed at the idea of a man performing medical miracles. Others manifested their lack of belief through an unwillingness to perform the actions necessary to receive healing. However, Asclepius and his cult were skilled at converting them to believers.

PATIENCE

Although it was rare, Asclepius was patient with some nonbelievers. One lame man of Epidaurus came as a suppliant to the sanctuary on a stretcher, and in a dream saw the god break his crutch and order him to climb as high as possible up a ladder to the top of the sanctuary. The man tried at first, then lost his courage and rested on the cornice; finally he climbed back down. Asclepius was angry about the deed, then laughed at him

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for his cowardice. The man later carried out the task in daylight and walked out unhurt (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 236). This man proves himself a nonbeliever through his lack of faith in Asclepius' ways. As a result, Asclepius instructs him that climbing up a ladder will heal him, but the man fears going up it. In one of his less aggressive acts, Asclepius simply laughs off this act of cowardice. While it is easy to claim that Asclepius' lack of action proves that he did not take overt action to convert nonbelievers, the final detail of the account contrasts that: the man ultimately "dared to carry it out"—climbing the ladder. Asclepius' patience, in this case, proved successful in converting the patient to a believer, able to muster up the courage to climb the ladder. Therefore, Asclepius' lack of action nevertheless produced results.

GIFTS

However, Asclepius also did intentional acts to make others believe. As described above, Ambrosia of Athens laughed at the cures of Asclepius as incredible and impossible before her healing, at which point the god told her he would cure her but that in payment she would dedicate a silver pig to the Temple "as a memorial of her ignorance"; after saying this, he cut the diseased eyeball, poured in a drug, and when day came she walked out sound (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 230). In this case, Asclepius instills faith by requiring an expensive gift after healing. Originally, Ambrosia of Athens laughed at the cures and thought them impossible. Asclepius then requests a gift of a silver pig to be given as a "memorial of her ignorance." By asking for this gift, first, he is showing that he's confident in his ability to heal and that Ambrosia will be wrong. That is an intentional action designed to change her mind. Second, the request for a gift made of silver, which is expensive, is meant to test Ambrosia's faith. If she did not believe in Asclepius' healing, she would not promise him a gift after the procedure. One only pays someone that they know will provide a service, so the promise of a gift is proof that she believes that Asclepius will heal her.

PUNISHMENT

In his conversion of nonbelievers, however, Asclepius proves he can be harsh, for example, in the case of Cephisias, who laughed at the cures of Asclepius and asked why, if the god had the power to heal lame people, he had not healed Hephaestus. The god did not conceal that he was inflicting a penalty for the insolence: while riding, Cephisias was thrown by his horse, which had been tickled into bucking, and his foot was instantly crippled; he was carried into the Temple on a stretcher, and only after earnest entreaty did the god make him well (Edelstein & Edelstein, 1945, p. 236). Asclepius uses violent methods to convert Cephisias to a believer. It is Asclepius who intentionally causes a foot injury to Cephisias. It is unclear how he does so, but the inference can be made that he uses his godlike powers. The intention of the action is clear, though. It is meant to punish the insolence of Cephisias. Asclepius later uses this punishment to convert him into a believer. He heals the injury that he caused to prove his powers. Although the methods are different, the result is the same. These three

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nonbelievers—the unknown man of Epidaurus, Ambrosia of Athens, and Cephisias—become believers in the divine medical powers of Asclepius. Ożarowska (2020) makes a similar assertion regarding disbelief, arguing that the cult’s “punitive measures” were clearly meant to serve as guidance and as a means of creating an image of a powerful but well-disposed deity, one who rewards those who acknowledge and trust in his potency and goodwill (p. 74). Ożarowska emphasizes the effect Asclepius’ actions had on his image; however, the impact they had on his patients should be highlighted far more. His actions directly changed his patients’ mindset before their healing and made them believers.

While we cannot scientifically verify these ancient claims of incredible healing, we can understand the biological pathways that the Cult of Asclepius was unknowingly triggering. Bridging the gap between ancient ritual and modern medicine requires looking past the ‘miracle’ and toward the ‘mechanism.’ As such, the rituals of incubation and votive offerings were, in essence, a sophisticated delivery system for a psychological state that modern science now recognizes as a powerful physiological catalyst: optimism.

OPTIMISM AND ITS DEMONSTRABLE EFFECTS ON HEALING

Throughout this paper, Asclepius’ role has been clear: to instill faith, optimism, and belief into his patients. Today, there’s evidence that patients who are optimistic and believe they’ll be cured have better health outcomes. Many studies have confirmed the impact of optimism on health, including a meta-analytic review by Rasmussen et al. (2009) that analyzed studies of optimism across different areas of physical health and examined the correlation among all of them. The study analyzed whether the results were similar and whether a study’s methodology impacted its results. The researchers found that across every study reviewed, optimism was a significant predictor of health outcomes or markers, with all results significant at $p < .001$ (Rasmussen et al., 2009, p. 1). The significance of $p < .001$ is that it indicates a very low probability that these findings are due to chance. In every single study, authors were confident that optimism affected health. To quantify this impact, the researchers found that the mean effect size characterizing the relationship between optimism and physical health outcomes was 0.17 (Rasmussen et al., 2009, p. 1). The finding of 0.17 means that there is a positive correlation between optimism and health of 0.17 out of a scale of $-1 \leq r \leq 1$, which is a moderate effect size with real-world significance; when judging and interpreting effect sizes, 0.10 is considered small, 0.30 is considered medium, and 0.50 is considered large (Rasmussen et al., 2009, p. 7). While the correlation is not huge, it is sizable, especially for real-world examples. It can be concluded with confidence from these studies, therefore, that people with higher optimism consistently experience better health.

These findings in a modern meta-analysis provide a scientific perspective as to why Asclepius was so ‘angry’ with cowardly or skeptical patients. If optimism is a ‘significant predictor’ of health markers, then a skeptical patient was effectively sabotaging their own biological ability to heal. Asclepius’ harshness toward

nonbelievers wasn't just divine ego; it was a practical necessity to ensure the patient's internal chemistry was optimized for the 'miracle' to take hold.

Similar meta-analyses, such as one examining changes in optimism among older adults, had extremely similar results. Chen et al. (2025) found that even changes in optimism relatively late in life may contribute to better health and wellbeing across multiple domains essential for healthy aging (p. 743).

It is evident that, although specific correlation values between optimism and health may vary, nearly all studies indicate that optimism has an overall positive impact on physical health.

ASCLEPIUS AS AN ARCHITECT OF BELIEF RATHER THAN A PASSIVE TRIGGER OF THE PLACEBO EFFECT

Interpretations of the role of Asclepius and his cult in facilitating better outcomes for his patients vary significantly. For example, Panagiotidou (2021) appears to argue that Asclepius and his personnel were just a step in activating the placebo effect in patients, describing Asclepius as an external authority whose affirmation of healing could motivate patients to activate their own internal self-healing mechanisms and produce placebo responses (p. 218). Panagiotidou argues that for the placebo effect to happen, there must be an external authority. In this case, Asclepius acts as that authority, triggering reactions in the brain.

In a slightly different interpretation, Ożarowska (2020) argues for a more intentional role of the Asclepius Cult, however, with a more negative connotation, suggesting that temple personnel may have deliberately enhanced the role of faith and trust in order to incite belief in the effectiveness of the ritual (p. 74). Ożarowska uses the word "deliberately," which contrasts Panagiotidou's view of Asclepius and his cult as a passive trigger of the placebo effect. Ożarowska seems to take a more negative view of their actions because she uses words with a negative connotation, such as incite, which makes it appear as if the cult is tricking the patients into thinking something they don't want to.

Based on the evidence presented throughout this paper, however, it is clear that Asclepius played an intentional role in instilling belief into his patients so that they may have better outcomes. This argument is based on the fact that the Asclepius Cult took numerous purposeful actions to ensure that patients believed in Asclepius' power before their healing. Rather than being a small cog that boosted a placebo effect, the Cult was a larger driver in completely changing the mindset of patients. By contrast, the placebo effect has a negative connotation because creating it requires tricking the patient's mind into thinking something that is not true. However, Asclepius did not trick the mind; he shifted the entire mindset of patients, which today has been scientifically proven to yield better outcomes in medicine.

By using the word “inciting,” Ożarowska puts a negative connotation on the Cult’s actions. Inciting, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, means “to encourage someone to do or feel something unpleasant or violent” (“Incite,” n.d.). The priests were not encouraging patients to feel something unpleasant. In fact, they were putting hope into the patients, which is far more pleasant than despair. In addition, the Cult’s actions were not meant to lead to violence but instead to better treatment results. These were intentional actions meant to improve a person’s health.

The actions of Asclepius and his Cult were neither accidental nor ill-intended. They were planned and purposeful acts designed to yield the best possible results after treatment.

ASCLEPIUS’ HEALING LEGACY AND THE ENDURING POWER OF OPTIMISM IN MEDICINE

Asclepius has one of the most prominent legacies of any healer in the history of medicine. Symbols of him can be seen in everyday life on ambulances, hospital signs, and pharmacies. There are even organizations and an entire plant genus named after him. He is still known today, thousands of years after his death, for his incredible healing powers, whether mythological or real. While Asclepius was known to possess godlike healing powers, few remember the specific actions he and his cult took to ensure the best healing possible. Together, they understood the power of not just procedures but also a patient’s mindset. They recognized that hope, belief, and optimism could change medical outcomes and took deliberate steps to shape patients’ attitudes before and after treatment using visual cues, rituals including inducing religious experiences, incubation, and gifts of faith, as well as the conversion of nonbelievers.

Today, medicine is more advanced than ever before. Humans have developed robotic surgery, life-changing vaccines, and drugs that can alter the mind and behavior. There appear to be few obvious similarities to medicine in the age of Asclepius. However, there is one factor that has stayed the same throughout thousands of years: the power of optimism and hope on health. And yet, many people seem to have forgotten this simple fact with all of our cutting-edge innovations. Asclepius and ancient medicine are a reminder of how the mind can affect health: simply changing one’s attitude can produce positive medical outcomes. Asclepius was able to achieve medical miracles that people believed to be impossible, in part, by creating an environment that facilitated optimism. The power of positive thinking continues to help people today, as modern science has proven. It is evident that when pessimism is replaced with trust, hope, and belief, health can improve in measurable ways—just as the ancient anecdotes about Asclepius have been suggesting all along.

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