

## True symbol of medicine

I am writing a delayed response to the letter<sup>1</sup> by Dr Miller in the June 1999 issue. I have just returned from Kosovo, where I served as a Regimental Medical Officer, and have only now started going through my mail.

During my leave last October, my wife and I visited the island of Kos, Greece, the birthplace of Hippocrates and site of the Aesculapeon. I have always been impressed that my own Corps in the military and the various Canadian medical authorities use the staff of Aesculapius rather than the staff of Mercury (Hermes). I understand the history of medicine a little differently than Dr Miller.

Aesculapius was the patron deity of medicine (the physician to the gods) and,



**Still standing:** Dr Currie on the island of Kos, Greece, under the tree where Hippocrates is said to have taught.

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being the son of Apollo, was trained in the healing arts by a centaur. After his death, he became the Greek god of healing. His children (Panacea and Hygeia) also became important figures in medicine. Hermes was the Greek god of commerce and thieves. His staff has no real medical significance and was often paraded by Greek and Roman officials for use in diplomacy.

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the staff of Aesculapius "with its single serpent is the only true symbol of medicine." If one looks anywhere on the island of Kos or around the archeological sites of the Aesculapeon, the single serpent persists, with nary a sign of Hermes or his staff of thieves. I am not sure where Dr Miller gets the idea that the thief and cattle driver Hermes was one of the great fathers of medicine. I suggest he read Carlos Parada's *Genealogical Guide to Greek Mythology*.<sup>2</sup>

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### References

1. Miller GB. Which snake was devoured? [letter]. *Can Fam Physician* 1999;45:1441.
2. Parada C. *Genealogical guide to Greek mythology*. Jonsered, Sweden: P. Åströms Förlag; 1993.