

ARTICLE · CULTURA & SAÚDE

The History of the Medical Prescription

The mythical and Latin origins of the Rx symbol on the medical prescription

Alexandre Amato

Received for publication in December 2003 · Section: Article · Language: English

ABSTRACT

The author discusses the origin of the Rx symbol, the crossed "R" used by physicians at the start of a prescription, clarifying that it is not a plain "R" and "x" but an italic "R" whose leg is crossed by the stroke of the "x". Several explanations for its origin are presented. One links the symbol to the Eye of Horus, or Sacred Eye, of ancient Egypt, associated with protection and the restoration of health, retelling the legend of the god Horus, whose eye was torn out by Seth and later restored by Thoth. Another hypothesis derives the symbol from the Latin *recipere*, in the sense of recovery. The text also mentions the formula "*fiat mistura*" in old prescriptions and the interpretation of Rx as an invocation to Jupiter. It concludes by suggesting that the symbol is little used in Brazil because of its essentially Catholic character.

KEYWORDS: *rx symbol; medical prescription; eye of horus; recipere; history of medicine; pharmacy*

The crossed "R" (Rx) is a symbol used by some physicians at the beginning of their prescriptions. It is not a simple "R" and "x"; it is a symbol that does not exist in our alphabet—an italic "R" with a longer leg, crossed by the line of the "x".

There are several explanations for its origin. One holds that the symbol derives from the "Eye of Horus" or "Sacred Eye," a mythological symbol of ancient Egypt meaning protection, restoration of health, intuition, and vision. The Egyptians used the symbol to ward off danger, illness, and bad luck, and it closely resembles the abbreviation "Rx". The symbol originated in the legend of the Egyptian god Horus (or Harpocrates), god of the Sky, son of Osiris (god of the Sun) and Isis (goddess of Nature), who fought against his uncle, the god Seth (god of Chaos), murderer of his father, for the throne of Egypt. In one of their struggles, Seth tore out Horus's left eye (the Moon), but it was healed and his vision restored when Thoth (god of Wisdom and Magic) reassembled the parts and poured gazelle's milk over them. Finally, after 80 years, Horus,

with his vision restored, defeated Seth and took the throne of Egypt, reuniting Egypt once again.

The symbol combines a human eye with the markings of a falcon, or the scars of its restoration, since Horus had the head of a falcon. It has been used for centuries, representing health and protection.

Another theory holds that it derives from the Latin "*recipere*," meaning "recovery" or "take, thus," and precedes the prescriptions of some physicians.

In the days when physicians had to prescribe the formula of a medicine, mixing and compounding its ingredients, the abbreviation "Rx" was completed by a statement such as "*fiat mistura*," meaning "let the mixture be made."

Another theory holds that "Rx" is an invocation to the Roman god, or to the planet of good fortune, Jupiter—a prayer to him that the treatment be effective—so much so that, in ancient medical manuscripts, all the R's were crossed.

Perhaps the symbol is not much used in our country because we are essentially Catholic.

