

Soranus of Ephesus: The practice of neonatal manipulation in the history of ancient western medicine

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Abstract. The work of Soranus of Ephesus – the founder of gynaecology and scientific obstetrics – on neonatal therapeutic massage is truly interesting glimpse into the history of ancient medicine. This treatise, in addition to the importance it offers in describing important techniques that affect the body size of the newborn, is seen as the first study that conceptualizes the practice of massage as a process of shaping and modelling the perfect citizen of the ancient world.

Key words: ancient medicine, neonatal massage, Soranus of Ephesus

One of the most interesting works on massage in ancient medicine is offered in the work of Soranus of Ephesus (90-150 CE), the methodical doctor who wrote a treatise on women's diseases, childbirth and the care and treatment of newborns. This Greek physician, who lived in the first half of the II century AD in Alexandria and Rome, was the important leader of the methodical school at this time, founding gynaecology and scientific obstetrics.

Soranus' work is addressed to the *maia*, the midwife who was responsible for the management of 'feminine things', women's bodies, their delicate balances at the time of pregnancy, as well as childbirth. A large part of his study is dedicated to the knowledge that the midwife must have in order to judge if the newborn is healthy, strong, and can be regularly treated and fed. With regard to these indications, we also find the use of bathing and massage practices to be used with the newborn. While the bath should be carried out carefully, especially at night, because it tends to cool the already weak and fragile body of the newborn, making the child excessively atonic, there is a great deal of importance placed on the *maia* knowing the correct massage techniques. She should take a wool or linen cloth, lay it out over her knees, and then spread lukewarm olive oil over the baby's body. The *maia*'s left hand should then be placed under the right shoulder

of the newborn, tilting it slightly on the right side and starting to massage it with warm, well-tempered water (1). Once the child's body has been warmed up uniformly, with her index finger immersed in water and oil, the midwife gently massages the baby's mouth, as well as the inside of the mouth, freeing up the mucous membranes. After this, she should gently massage the belly in order to make the newborn urinate. After a short bath, the child should be held up by the feet, with his or her head down, so that the vertebrae acquire the proper natural distance from each other, the spine reaches the correct curvature and retracted ligaments become looser. Following a quick dry, the baby should be once again anointed with fatty substances, proceeding with the modelling of the body parts in order to give them their characteristic and natural shape. The massage moves from the right side to the left side of the body, and then vice versa. The massage then moves from top to bottom, up to the ankles and from the ankles upwards, towards the nape. The obstetrician pushes the right foot towards the left hand and the left foot towards the right hand, a movement that is used to soften the ligaments of the joints, allowing them to acquire mobility thanks to circumduction. Moreover, according to Soranus, the viscous matter that accumulates through natural processes in the joints during embryogenesis is expelled through these forced and

repeated movements (2). The *maia* then brings the legs together, with the newborn's feet close to base of the back, massaging the limbs along their entire length. The midwife continues the massage by rubbing the baby's heels, aligning them properly and using her palm, she also smoothes the spine with movements in a straight line and with oblique traction – with her wrist, she moves up the entire length of the spine, trying to get the right vertebrae alignment and joints, which ensures a straight and strong back for the newborn. At this point, the massage is applied to the lower back, which must be modelled so that it acquires the proper shape that meets the standards of balance and equilibrium that define Greek-Roman beauty. She can then work on the kidneys, where sometimes humps develop, which are resistant to the back treatment. Lastly, she rubs the newborn's head with circular movements, using both hands to push alternately and simultaneously forehead and chin, in order to give the right shape to the skull so that it is neither too sharp nor too angled upwards. Soft kneading should also be used on the newborn's neck in order to give some freedom to the vertebrae and allow the baby to carry out movements that the newborn cannot do alone.

Massages should be repeated on a daily basis, much like the use of liquid in the baby's eyes in order to avoid ophthalmic problems and the formation of membranes – the baby's small arms are massaged lengthwise and then crossed over the abdomen, the legs are first stretched and then brought together, keeping in mind that they need to be blocked in order

to correct any defects that may arise due to the tight bandages placed around the baby's body. Furthermore, the nose and forehead must also be massaged and shaped, so that they do not become snub, hunched or sunken – if the child is a boy, massage should also be used to help lengthen the baby's foreskin, which, gently pushed day by day to cover the glans penis, will help avoid problems as a teenager and adult (3).

Moreover, Soranus goes beyond therapeutic massage. He believes that the use of massages train and educate the body, a sort of modelling (*to diaplasmòn*) that helps to ensure the newborn's beauty, proportion and health. Massages are used for hygiene and prevention, shaping the body into the perfect *cives romanus*.

References

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