



Pythagoras, although known primarily as a mathematician and astronomer, had an important influence on early medicine. Pythagoras' doctrine of numbers, or theory of numbers, which constitutes one of the bases of Pythagorean philosophy, was very important to Hippocratic medicine—particularly the Hippocratic concept of the healing power of nature. To the Pythagorean school is ascribed the belief that medical investigation is in accord with philosophical reasoning: health is a state of perfect harmony, disease is an expression of a disturbance of this harmony, and cure is the return from the disturbed to the harmonious state.

Pythagoras was born around 560 BC, on Samos in the Aegean Sea. Little is known about his life. Apparently he never committed his philosophy to writing, although treatises (including the famous Pythagorean theorem) later were ascribed to his authorship. All that is known of his doctrines comes from his disciples, members of a brotherhood founded by Pythagoras. The members practiced moral self-control, temperance, and vegetarianism; and they cultivated arts and crafts, gymnastics, mathematics, medicine, and music. A member, Alcmaeon of Croton, was one of the first to perform anatomic dissections.

Pythagoras died in Metapontum in southern Italy around 480 BC. He was honored on a stamp issued by Greece in 1955. The stamp commemorates the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the first school of philosophy by Pythagoras on Samos.—MARC A. SHAMPO, PHD, ROBERT A. KYLE, MD