

Caduceus: what's in a name

Every contemporary physician would almost certainly have encountered the symbol of a winged staff with two entwined serpents and associated it as a mnemonic synonymous with the gift of healing. But since most of us are so preoccupied with the responsibility of alleviating physical pain and suffering, we are probably less consumed by the necessity to enquire what this symbol signifies, whether it has a name and if so, what its etymology is.

The *Caduceus* or the Staff of (*the Greek god*) Hermes, is more often than not, used as the symbol for medicine or doctors instead of the more appropriate '*Rod of Asclepius*' represented by a staff forked at one end, with a single serpent ascending around its length. Early confusion between the symbols almost certainly arose due to the links between alchemy and Hermes, whose symbol is the caduceus. The alchemists adopted the caduceus because Hermes, the God of Messengers, was also the patron deity of gamblers, thieves, tricksters and alchemists. By the end of the 16th century, alchemy became widely associated with medicine in some areas, leading to the use of the caduceus as a medical symbol.



The first recorded use of the caduceus in a medical context was in the printer's vignette portrayed by Johann Frobenius, who embellished the staff not with wings but with doves, with the biblical epigraph "Be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

The first official use of the caduceus as a medical emblem

was in 1902 when it was adopted by the US Army's medical department.



The meaning, purpose, and esoteric representation of the caduceus can be interpreted from the sum of its parts. The staff (particularly the herald's staff) was a symbol of authority carried in the hands of messengers.

The winged quality of the wand of Hermes is in keeping with the alchemical or astrological importance of Mercury (the planet, god, and element) quite often meaning fluidity, transformation, information, and new beginnings (as the elemental quarter of air is often likened to). The snake is often depicted in non Judeo-Christian traditions as a source or deliverer of wisdom.

Note that the snakes are bound to each other in a double helix - a shape of stability, creation, and life with uncanny resemblance to the shape of DNA.

From this it becomes quite evident that the caduceus represents the authority to quickly deliver vital or wise information to aid, assist, negotiate, and enlighten. In the Hermetic Tradition, the caduceus is a symbol of spiritual awakening, and has been likened to the Kundalini serpents of Hindu mysticism.

The rod of Asclepius represents the healing arts by combining the serpent, which in shedding its skin symbolises rebirth and fertility, while the staff, stands as an icon of authority befitting the god of Medicine. The snake wrapped around the staff is widely claimed to be a species of rat snake, *Elaphe longissima* whose venom is believed to possess healing properties.

According to Greek mythology, Asclepius was said to have learned the art of healing from Chiron. He is customarily represented as a surgeon on the ship *Argo*. Asclepius was so skilled in the medical arts that he was reputed to have brought patients back from the dead. For this he was punished and placed in the heavens as the constellation Ophiuchus (meaning 'serpent-bearer'). This constellation lies between Sagittarius and Libra. In early Christianity, the constellation Ophiuchus was associated with St Paul holding the Maltese Viper.

Source: *Wikipedia*