

Pediatric Endocrine Diseases in Pre-Hispanic Aztecs

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ABSTRACT

Aztec medical and religious knowledge derived from Olmecs (800 BC), Teotihuacans (100 BC) and Toltecs (1100-1521 AC); however, there is no unique source that accurately presents Aztec medicine. Sahagun combines naturalism and religion but not magic ("First Memorials", "Matritense Codex", "Florentine Codex" and "General History of New Spain"); Hernández gives a naturalistic image but is full of mistakes ("Natural History of the New Spain"); Badiano tries to match Aztecs with contemporary Europeans and with the first century medicine of the Romans ("Badiano Codex"), and Ruiz de Alarcón contains plenty of magical concepts ("Book of Superstition"). For the Aztecs, surveillance of growth was very important and represented a balance between body and soul. They described the different steps of pubertal development. They had specific treatments for thyroid disease in children, mainly hypothyroidism and goiter. There are no references to rickets, nor to type 1 or 2 diabetes mellitus.

KEY WORDS

medicine, history, Aztecs, hypothyroidism, growth, rickets, diabetes mellitus

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When the Spaniards arrived in Mexico in 1519, the dominant culture was the Aztec or Mexica's Emporium, which represented the syncretism of the civilizations that had developed in the previous 2000 years in Meso-America: in the central zone of Mexico and Honduras, mainly Olmecs (800 BC), Teotihuacans (100 BC) and Toltecs (1100-1521). All these cultures had similar characteristics: a sacred calendar of 260 days and a solar calendar of 365 days; hieroglyphic or pictographic handwriting; a sacred ball game that symbolized the astral fight between good and evil gods; the use of cocoa beans as money; a complex pantheon of gods; and the belief that almost all physical and psychological diseases were due to disunity between body and spirit, caused by punishment from one or more of the gods¹.

Aztec medical and religious knowledge was preserved from one generation to another by hieroglyphic handwriting in the priesthood and by oral transmission among the common people. The magical beliefs of the people (*macehualtin*) explained why at the moment of Spanish military conquest in 1521 their religious beliefs retained the magical aspects characteristic of hunter and collector tribes, although the Aztecs had reached the level of a state characterized not only by social stratification, an army, and a central political power that dictated laws, rules, and duties, but by a complex administrative and hierarchical priestly organization².

These magical beliefs persisted in the new mixed culture provided by the Spanish authorities who accepted that the native governors were participants of the new social and political organization, mainly since the numbers of the conquered people were greater than the number of conquerors, but also because the Spanish thought that through them they would more easily introduce Christianity and European laws as instruments of