

# The Birth of Asclepius: A Postmortem Caesarean Like No Other

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This woodcut, taken from the 1549 edition of Alessandro Benedetti's *De Re Medica*, shows the birth of the future god of medicine, Asclepius. His mother, Coronis, seen recumbent, is undergoing perhaps the first ever Caesarean section. The procedure is being performed by her lover, and the father of Asclepius, the god Apollo. Coronis was a nymph, and as such was expected to remain monogamous while she cleaved to Apollo. Gods, on the other hand, were not only at liberty to wander, but were expected to take mortal lovers. Coronis' big mistake was to do the same: to consort with a mortal while connected with Apollo. When a crow whispered of this sin in Apollo's ear, he didn't hesitate to kill Coronis. However, as she lay dying, Apollo took pity on his unborn son and ripped Asclepius from Coronis' womb. Apollo later took the infant to a

centaur, who raised him to be a model citizen. Asclepius' sound countenance and rugged good looks made him a natural choice for the position god of medicine. Asclepius fathered several other medically relevant gods: his daughter Hygeia was the goddess of cleanliness and sanitation and his daughter Panacea was the goddess of cures. It is a good thing, perhaps, that Apollo was feeling marginally charitable on the day he shot his lover.

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J Obstet Gynaecol Can 2013;35(8):768

