

Medical Ethics in Islamic History at a Glance

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Summary

The definition of ethics and morality in medicine has lately become a favourite and hot topic for politicians and non-physician bureaucrats who lack the insight into the whole gamut of patient- physician relationship. It is time that the physician stood his/her ground. He/She is still regarded very highly and trusted by the people as shown by polls. Unless the physician takes proper steps, the public trust is likely to wither away.

Every teaching physician needs to realise his/her duty - to train the budding physicians, not only in the art of medicine, but also in handling the ethical dilemmas of medical practice.

Key Words; Medical Ethics, History of Medicine.

If one looks back, it becomes apparent that *Hadith* refers to these problems (1). It will also be of interest to note that problems faced by the physicians and the patients today are not any different from the problems faced in earlier periods of history. would like to quote some sayings of prophet Mohammad (PNUH) on the responsibility of the physicians.

“A person who practices art of healing when he is not acquainted with medicine, will be responsible for his actions.”

In another *Hadith* the prophet said:

“O servants of Allah, seek treatment, for Allah has not sent down any illness without sending down its treatment.”

Islamic teachings made treatment mandatory when it was definitely available, and also if holding off this treatment would be harmful. But if one is unsure of any benefit from a treatment and any harm is feared, then it is discouraged. These principles were designed to discourage quackery and protect the patients.

One of the most extensive works dealing with ethics was written in the 10th century by Ishaq ibn Ali Ruhawi, a Christian who embraced Islam. It is not possible to cover here all aspects of his writings. His book, *Adab al-Tabib* (Ethics of a Physician) is an extensive work. Its English translation appears in the

Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia (2).

The Islamic philosophy and the Muslim code was so realistic and practical that al-Ruhawi was at ease in dealing with this difficult subject. The society was changing from a tribal primitive society to a more orderly society with emphasis on human values and strong religious feelings. These were times of great changes. Therefore, the setting for this work was not any different from the one prevailing at present. It may be worthwhile just to glance at the titles of the 20 chapters of *Adab al-Tabib*:

1. The loyalty and the faith of the Physician, and Ethics He Must Follow to improve His Soul and Morals.
2. Care of the Physician's Body.
3. What the Physician Must Avoid and Beware of.
4. Directions of the Physician to the Patient.
5. Manners of the Visitors.
6. Care of Remedies by the Physician.
7. What does the Physician Asks his Patient and Nurse.
8. What does the Patient Conceal from the Physician.
9. How the Healthy and ill Must Take Orders of the Physician.
10. Training of Servants by the Patient before Illness.
11. Patient and Visitors.

12. Dignity of the Medical Profession.
13. Respect for the Physician.
14. Physicians and Peculiar Incidents to Aid Treatment.
15. Medical Art for the Moral values people.
16. Examination of Physicians for accreditation.
17. Removal of Corruption of Physicians.
18. Warning against Quacks.
19. Harmful Habits.
20. Care of the Physician Himself.

Adab al-Tabib is a beautiful illustration of the fact that problems of responsibility, ethical dilemmas, and needs of the society are nothing new to medicine. A review of this work brings home the realization that the present day physician may have been derelict in his responsibility towards the current ethical needs. In the past, it was the physician who was the advocate of morality and defended ethics.

Also in the 9th century, when the medical profession was a well respected specialty and its leaders kept it this way by laying down proper ethics (2, 3). Abu al-Hasan Al-Tabari (born in 838 A.D.) the chief physician in 870 A.D., described in his book (*Firdous al-Hikmat*) - The Paradise of Wisdom - the Islamic code of ethics as follows:

I. Personal Characters of The Physician

The Physician ought to be modest, virtuous, merciful, and unaddicted to liquor. He should wear clean clothes, be dignified, and have well-groomed hair and beard. He should not join the ungodly nor sit at their table. He should select his company to be persons of good reputation. He should be careful of what he says and should not hesitate to ask forgiveness if he has made an error. He should be forgiving and never seek revenge. He should be friendly and peace-maker. He should not make jokes or laugh at the improper time or place.

II. His Obligation Towards Patients

He should avoid predicting whether a patient will live or die, only God (Allah) knows. He ought not lose his temper when his patient keeps asking questions, but should answer gently and compassionately. He should treat alike the rich and the poor, the master and the servant, the powerful and the powerless, the

elite and the illiterate. God will reward him if he helps the needy. The physician should not be late for his rounds or his house calls. He should be punctual and reliable. He should not wrangle about his fees. If the patient is very ill or in an emergency, he should be thankful, no matter how much he is paid. He should not give drugs to a pregnant woman for an abortion unless necessary for the mother's health. If the physician prescribes a drug orally, he should make sure that the patient understands the name correctly, in case he would ask for the wrong drug and get worse instead of better. He should be decent towards women and should not divulge the secrets of his patients.

III. His Obligation Towards The Community

The physician should speak no evil of reputable men of the community or be critical of any one's religious belief.

IV. His Obligations Towards His Colleagues

The physician should speak well of his acquaintances and colleagues. He should not honor himself by shaming others. If another physician has been called to treat his patient, the family doctor should not criticize his colleague even if the diagnosis and the recommendations of the latter differ from his own. However, he has the obligation to explain what each point of view may lead to since his duty is to counsel the patient as best as he can. He must warn him that combining different types of therapy may be dangerous because the actions of different drugs may be incompatible and injurious.

V. His Obligations Towards His Assistants

If his subordinate does wrong, the physician should not rebuke him in front of others, but privately and cordially.

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