

# Islamic medical ethics a thousand years ago

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For several centuries, the world, and particularly Europe has benefited from the great contributions brought about by Muslim physicians in the field of medicine. These contributions were not only based on technical skills but also on the role of eminent Muslim physicians in establishing medical ethics. Many prominent physicians of the Islamic civilization involved themselves with professional ethics; among them were al-Ruhawi, and al-Razi (Rhazes). Both wrote the earliest and most thorough books on medical ethics over a thousand years ago.<sup>1,2</sup> Islamic medical ethics refers to Islamic guidance on ethical or moral issues relating to medical and scientific fields, in particular, those dealing with human life. Islamic bioethics is an extension of Shari'ah (Islamic law), which is itself based on 2 foundations: The Qur'an (the holy book of all Muslims) and the Sunna (the aspects of Islamic law based on the Prophet Muhammad's words or acts). The fundamental basis of Islamic bioethics is that all rulings and actions must fall in accordance with Islamic law (Shari'ah).<sup>3</sup>

The Quran and sayings of the Prophet established morality and mode of conduct of physicians and surgeons. The Prophet Muhammad gave many rules regarding seeking remedy, and the importance of consent. The Islamic jurists required from the practitioner to be competent and obtain licensed to practice. He also should get the consent of the patient or his guardian if he is not competent, otherwise he would be liable.<sup>3</sup> Abdul Malik ibn Habib Al-Andalusi (d238 H/853 cc)<sup>4</sup> in his book "Tibbi Nabawi" stressed that the physician should be competent, licensed, and should obtain the consent of the patient, otherwise he would be liable. Ibn Al Qayim in his book "Tibbi Nabawi"<sup>5</sup> made comprehensive details pertaining to human behavior

and ethics, and stressed that the physician should be well trained, alert, and keen on getting his job carried out in the best way.

The principles of bioethics in the Western world were developed and outlined in 1979 by 2 American philosophers and bioethicists, Beauchamp and Childress in their book "Principles of Biomedical Ethics".<sup>6</sup> The concept of bioethical principles has since been regarded as a purely "Western" innovation, which is absent in the Islamic health care system. These bioethical principles: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice have been legitimized by Muslims jurists as falling into the sphere of Islamic law, and have also been supported by Qur'anic verses. There are, however, many differences in the details, especially regarding autonomy.<sup>3</sup>

Both Al-Ruhawi, and Al-Razi (Rhazes) built their knowledge upon themes from the Hellenistic medical tradition and incorporated it with Islamic traditions. In fact, one of the earliest and most thorough books on medical ethics is entitled "Adab al-Tabib" (Practical Ethics of the Physician) by Ishaq ibn Ali al-Ruhawi, a Christian who probably embraced Islam.<sup>7</sup> Al-Ruhawi was a contemporary to Abu Bakr Al-Razi and lived in the second-half of the ninth century A.D. This book was translated to English by Martin Levey in 1967 (Transactions of the American Philosophical Society).<sup>1</sup> Al-Razi has also written a book fully devoted to medical ethics called "Akhlaq al-Tabib" (Medical Ethics).<sup>2</sup> To establish such opinions in a well organized book over a thousand years ago is quite significant. Besides, these ideas still maintain their validities nowadays and are laid down in several ethical codes of medicine.

Although Al-Ruhawi quoted Aristotle, Socrates, Galen, and Hippocrates to support these ideals, he used Islamic traditions, as well, to further support his points.<sup>7</sup>

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This shows a distinguished Islamic paradigm that any knowledge considered as part of the culture of humanity and does not contradict with Islam, should be accepted as a mercy from God.<sup>1</sup> A glance at the chapters in *Adab al-Tabib* will reveal how thorough and comprehensive this book is: 1. The loyalty and faith in which a physician must believe, and on the ethics he must follow; 2. Care of the physician's body; 3. What the physician must avoid and beware of; 4. The directions of the physician to the patients; 5. The behavior of the patient's visitors; 6. The simple and compound drugs, which a physician must consider; 7. What does a physician ask the patients or others; 8. The necessity for ill and healthy people to have faith in the physician; 9. The agreement that the patient must follow the instructions of the physician; 10. The behavior of the patient with his servants; 11. The behavior of the patient with his visitors; 12. The dignity of the medical profession. 13. The people must respect a physician according to his skills; 14. Peculiar incidents concerning physicians; 15. Medicine must be practiced by those who have a suitable nature and moral character; 16. Examination of physicians for accreditation; 17. The kings may remove corruption of physicians and guide the people to proper medicine; 18. The necessity of warning against quacks who call themselves physicians; 19. Faulty habits of people, which may hurt them; and 20. What a physician must observe during periods of health in order to prepare for periods of illness.<sup>1,7</sup> As the chapter titles clearly illustrate, *Adab al-Tabib* is not only a manual of professional ethics, but contains important information on personal hygiene, patient-doctor relationship, and even comments on the relation between profession and the government. Al-Ruhawi's work demonstrates the ability of Islamic thinkers of incorporating different traditions and philosophies into an Islamic discourse. *Adab al-Tabib* is a magnificent illustration of the fact that problems of professional responsibility and ethical dilemmas are not new to medicine.<sup>1,7</sup>

The second book is "*Akhlaq al-Tabib*" (Medical Ethics) written by Abu-Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyya al-Razi (865-925).<sup>8</sup> Al-Razi is surely one of the most prominent medical scientists of the Islamic golden age. He earned the title "Galen of Arabs" thanks to his authority and achievements in medicine, and was

considered the father of Islamic medicine, the greatest physician of the Muslim World, as well as a respected philosopher.<sup>2</sup> In addition to being a famous physician, Al-Razi is known for being an encyclopedic scholar. In total he wrote over 200 books and treatises on a variety of subjects.

In his book "*Akhlaq Al-Tabib*,"<sup>8</sup> he presented the first model for ethics in Islamic medicine. He felt that it was important not only for the physician to be an expert in his field, but also to be a role model. His ideas on medical ethics were divided into 3 concepts; the physician's responsibility to patients and to self, and also the patients' responsibility to physicians.<sup>2</sup> According to Al-Razi,<sup>8</sup> the first thing to bear in mind is that a physician should continue studying, advancing scientific knowledge, and maintaining a commitment to medical education. He recommends that physicians be virtuous and refrain from conceit because, according to the philosopher, the most important point in treatment is the dedication of physician's himself to his patients and to love them. In addition to this, physicians should pay attention to their appearances. The clothes and hair should be neat and clean.

The physician has duties to the patients. The first of which is to treat the patients kindly, not to be rude or aggressive but soft-spoken, compassionate, and behave modestly.<sup>8</sup> Al-Razi stresses that the second duty is to keep the secret they have learnt during the treatment process of their patients. This principle, put forward by Al-Razi, takes place in the Hippocratic Oath. Another duty is to encourage the patient psychologically. The physician should encourage the patients even who have no hope of recovering from their diseases and instill this hope in them. To inculcate positive ideas into patients is an important method in modern psychology science.

To Al-Razi,<sup>8</sup> another duty of the physician to his patients is to treat the patients equally regardless of their wealth. The aim of the physician should not be the money he will get after treatment but the cure. Physicians should be even more eager to cure the poor and homeless than curing the rich. Al-Razi felt great pity for physicians who took care for the well being of princes, nobility, and women, because they did not obey the doctor's orders to restrict their diet or get medical treatment, thus making it most difficult being their physician.<sup>2,8</sup> Al-Razi also recommends that physicians be more careful while treating women. He quotes one of Galen's sentence: 'Physician must adhere to God sincerely; he should only look at where he has to while curing beautiful and attractive women, and strictly avoid from looking at other parts'.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the patient has also duties to the physician. According

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to Al-Razi,<sup>8</sup> the first thing for a patient to fulfill is to treat the physician kindly and to talk gently. Al-Razi, in this point, supports Hippocrates by quoting his words. 'Find your physician and prepare him before you need him'.

He attacked charlatans and fake doctors who roamed the cities and countryside selling their nostrums and "cures". At the same time, he warned that even highly educated doctors did not have the answers to all medical problems and could not cure all sicknesses or heal every disease.<sup>2</sup> According to Al-Razi,<sup>8</sup> "physicians must depend on Allah and expects cure from Him. He must never think that his mighty and work are the reasons, otherwise, Allah shall prevent him from such cure".<sup>2,8</sup>

In conclusion, we presented the first 2 books of Islamic medical ethics, written over 1000 years ago. This clearly demonstrated the role of Islamic scholars in laying down the principles of medical ethics, well before Western writings.

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## Supplements

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