

Islamic Code of Medical Professional Ethics*

Abdul Rahman C. Amine, † M.D. and Ahmed El-Kadi, †† M.D.
Oak Lawn, Illinois and Panama City, Florida

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5915/20-1-13052>

Medicine was defined by Muslim physicians such as Al-Rāzī (841-826 A.D.) and Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, 980-1036 A.D.) as the art concerned with the preservation of good health, combating of diseases and restoration of health to the sick. For many centuries, the world has witnessed and benefited from the great advances made by Muslim physicians in the area of health sciences. These advances were not just based on technical skill or intellectual superiority. They were equally well founded on a clear understanding of the role of the Muslim physician as derived from Islamic teachings and philosophy. For thousands of years, ethics has been recognized as an essential requirement in the making of a physician. Although the ancient codes of ethics have to some extent stressed this requirement,^{1,2} they are still deficient and contain grave errors.³ Contemporary codes of ethics tend to be more liberal and less restrictive. The Qur'ānic ethics, on the other hand, stand out as a perfect model for all mankind, all professions and all time.

The medical ethical requirements proposed in this paper are primarily based on Qur'ānic ethics. They include guidelines for the physician's behaviour and attitude, both at the personal and professional levels. The same standard of moral and ethical values should guide the physician in his/her private life and while conducting his/her professional business. A person who lacks moral values in private life cannot be trusted in professional activities, even with the highest professional and technical qualifications. It is impossible for a person to have two different ethical standards. "Allāh has not made for any man two hearts in his body . . ."⁴

The following verses from the Qur'ān are most suited as a guide for the personal characteristics of the physician:

"Luqmān admonished his son: My son, he said,

Authors' addresses: †6815 West 95th Street, Oak Lawn, IL. 60453, ††Akbar Clinic, 4000 East Third Street, Panama City, FL 32404

*Original article was published in JIMA, 1981, 13: 108-110.

serve no God besides Allāh, for idolatry is an abominable injustice. We have enjoined man to show kindness to his parents, for with much pain does his mother bear him and he is not weaned before he is two years of age. We said: give thanks to Me and to your parents; to Me shall all things return. But if they press you to serve besides Me what you know nothing of, do not obey them, be kind to them in this world and follow the path of those who submit to Me: To Me you shall all return and I will declare to you all that you have done. My son, Allāh will know about all things be they as small as a grain of mustard seed, be they hidden inside a rock or in heaven or on Earth, Allāh is wise and all-knowing. My son, establish regular prayers, enjoin what is just and forbid what is wrong; endure with fortitude whatever befalls you, for this is firmness of purpose in the conduct of affairs. Do not treat men with scorn nor walk proudly on the earth; Allāh does not love the arrogant boaster. Rather, that your gait be modest and your voice low; the harshest of voices is the braying of the ass."⁵

Allāh also says: "... And those who restrain anger and forgive other men. Verily Allāh loves those who do good."⁶

Allāh further states: "It was the mercy of Allāh that you have dealt with them gently and if you were severe and harsh-hearted they would have broken away from about you. Therefore, forgive them, pray for their forgiveness and consult them in the conduct of affairs; then, when you have decided to proceed, depend on Allah for support: Verily Allāh loves those who depend on Him."⁷

Based on the above, the Muslim physician must believe in Allāh and in Islamic teachings and practice, both in private and public life. He must be grateful to his parents, teachers and elders. He must be humble, modest, kind, merciful, patient and tolerant. He must follow the path of the righteous and always seek Allāh's support.

The physician equipped with these virtues is capable of complying with the professional requirement to acquire and maintain proper knowledge. Allāh makes it clear in the Qur'ān:

"... Say: Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?"⁸

Allāh also states:

“... Verily, those who fear Allāh among his servants are those who have knowledge...”

Therefore, the believer is encouraged to always seek knowledge.

“... Say: O my Lord, advance me in knowledge.”¹⁰

The physician must also abide by the legal rules regulating his profession provided they do not violate Islamic teachings. The need to respect law and order is reflected in the following verse:

“Oh you who believe: Obey Allāh and obey the apostle, and those charged with authority among you...”¹¹

Recognizing Allāh as the maker and the owner of both patient and physician, it is only logical that the care provided to his patient must be in accordance with Allāh's guidelines.

A subject of great importance is the subject of life. Life is given by Allāh and cannot be taken away except by Him or with His permission. Allāh says in the Qur'an

“It is He who created death and life, that He may try which of you is best in deed...”¹²

He also says:

“... Nor can they control death nor life nor resurrection.”¹³

Allāh further states:

“... Whoever kills a human being not in lieu of another human being nor because of mischief on earth, it is as if he has killed all mankind and whoever saves the life of a human being, it is as if he has saved the life of all mankind.”¹⁴

The physician therefore has no right to terminate any human life under his care. This also applies to the unborn baby since clear evidence indicates that human life starts at the time of conception. Consequently, the physician has no right to terminate the life of the unborn baby unless it constitutes a definite threat to the mother's life.

The physician must realize that Allāh is watching and monitoring every thought and deed. This was clearly indicated in the verses quoted earlier.⁵ The same verses also indicate that the parents' demands are not to be obeyed if they are in violation of Allāh's orders, in spite of the fact that parents are considered to be most important after Allāh. Following the same principles, the physician has no right to follow popular demand or his patient's wishes if they are in violation of Allāh's orders.

Based on sound logic and clear Islamic teachings, the physician has no right to recommend or administer any harmful material to his patients. The most concise yet comprehensive guide in this matter is found in the following verse of the Qur'an:

“... And He makes for them good things lawful, and bad things forbidden...”¹⁵

This implies that anything forbidden by Allāh must be bad or harmful; anything proven to be bad

or harmful must be forbidden.

The humanitarian aspect of the medical profession must never be neglected or overlooked. The physician must render the needed help regardless of the financial ability or ethnic origin of the patient. A beautiful hint is found in the following Qur'anic verses:

“... And they feed, for the love of Allāh, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive, (saying) we feed you for the sake of Allāh alone, no reward do we desire from you, nor thanks.”¹⁶

When entrusted with the care of a patient, the physician must offer the needed advice with consideration for both the patient's body and mind, always remembering his basic obligation to enjoin what is just and forbid what is wrong.

The physician must adopt an appropriate manner of communication and be reminded of the ethics of speech referred to in the Qur'anic verses quoted earlier in this paper.⁵ Allāh describes the good believers:

“For they have been guided to the purest of speeches...”¹⁷

Situations requiring the physician to examine patients of the opposite sex are always a test of his moral character and his strength. A basic instruction is found in the following Qur'anic verses:

“Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them, and Allāh is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty.”¹⁸

Allāh further says:

“Allāh does wish to lighten your burden, for man was created weak.”¹⁹

It is therefore, advisable that the physician examine patients of the opposite sex in the presence of a third person whenever feasible. This will be an added protection for the physician and the patient.

The physician must not criticize another physician in the presence of patients or health personnel, remembering the wise Qur'anic advice:

“O you who believe, let not some men among you make fun of others; it may be that they are better than them; nor defame, nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by offensive nicknames...”²⁰

Allāh also says:

“Allāh does not love that evil be voiced in public speech, except where the person has suffered injustice...”²¹

The physician must refuse payment for the treatment of another physician or his immediate family. There is no specific instruction regarding this particular matter in the Qur'an or in Islamic tradition, however, reference is made to another situation

which may be used in analogy. Allāh says regarding Zakat money:

“Alms are for the poor, the needy and those employed to administer the funds . . .”²²

Here is a situation where the persons providing a certain service are entitled to the use of the same service at the time of need.

Last but not least, the physician must always strive to use wisdom in all his decisions and the reward will be great. Allāh says:

“ . . . And he to whom wisdom is granted, is granted a great deal of good indeed . . .”²³

In summary, the Muslim physician must believe in Allāh and in Islamic teachings, and practice these in both private and public life. The physician must be grateful to his/her parents, teachers and elders; be humble, modest, kind, merciful, patient and tolerant; follow the path of the righteous; and must always seek Allāh's support. The Muslim physician must stay abreast of current medical knowledge, and the legal requirements governing his profession. The physician must realize that Allāh is the maker and the owner of the patient's body and mind, and treat the patient within the framework of Allāh's teachings. The Muslim physician must realize that life was given to man by Allāh, that human life starts at the time of conception, and that human life cannot be taken away except by Allāh or with His permission. The Muslim physician should realize that Allāh is watching and monitoring every thought and deed; and follow Allāh's guidelines as his/her only criteria, even if they differ with popular demand or the patient's wishes. The Muslim physician should not recommend nor administer any harmful material; should render needed help regardless of financial ability or ethnic origin of the patient; should offer needed advice with consideration for both the patient's body and mind; should protect the patient's confidentiality; and should adopt and appropriate

manner of communication. The Muslim physician must examine a patient of the opposite sex in the presence of a third person whenever feasible; must not criticize another physician in the presence of patients or health personnel; must refuse payment for treatment of another physician or his immediate family and strive to use wisdom in all his/her decisions.

References

1. “Oath of Hippocrates”, Collection of Codes of Ethics, Museum of International College of Surgeons, Chicago, IL.
2. “Oath of the Hindu Physician”, Collection of Codes of Ethics, Museum of International College of Surgeons, Chicago, IL.
3. El-Kadi A, Professional Ethics; Ethics in the Medical Profession, JIMA, 1976, 27-30
4. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 33, verse 4
5. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 32, verses 13-19
6. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 3, verse 134
7. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 3, verse 159
8. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 39, verse 9
9. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 35, verse 28
10. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 20, verse 114
11. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 4, verse 59
12. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 67, verse 2
13. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 25, verse 3
14. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 5, verse 32
15. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 7, verse 157
16. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 76, verse 8-9
17. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 22, verse 24
18. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 24, verse 30-31
19. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 4, verse 28
20. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 49, verse 11
21. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 4, verse 148
22. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 9, verse 60
23. Glorious Qur'an, Chapter 2, verse 269