

Islam's Influence on Medicine*

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The great influence of Islam on modern western medicine was the subject of many published books and researches. But unfortunately, few researches deal with the influence of Islam as a religion and its teachings on medicine, its power in creating a healthy society having immunity against disease.

The first to acknowledge these facts was the famous writer Bernard Shaw. In the introduction to his book "The Doctor's Dilema"¹ he states that when the British occupied the Sandwich Islands, a plan was implemented to convert the nationals from Islam to Christianity. Missionaries were established there for such purpose. Bernard Shaw comments that unfortunately it had succeeded and resulted in the spread of communicable disease all over the island. They neglected the Islamic teachings of personal hygiene and community health.¹

The following is a brief outline of some of the medical principles that were promulgated early on by Islamic teachings:

1. Islam was the first religion to present a scientific and realistic theory on illness, and to acknowledge the role of medicine. Before Islam, the whole world believed that illness was a devil which dwelled in the human body as a punishment for committing a sin against the gods and that the only remedy was to perform a certain prayer to get the devils out of the patient's body. If the patient was not healed this meant that his faith was still weak. The Church in the middle ages did forbid people from seeking treatment; and scientists were prosecuted and burnt as witches and their books were also burnt. Bernard Shaw stated: "people refrained from calling doctors and left it all to God's mercy."¹ This was the case in Britain until the 19th century when a law was passed to imprison a father for 6 months because his child died without being seen by a doctor.

On the other hand, Islam taught us that disease is an abnormal state and that we are entitled to seek cure based on human effort with the permission of Allāh (SWT). When the Prophet (PBUH) im-

migrated from Makkah to Madinah the sick approached him to be healed. He visited the sick and prayed for their relief, but he always told them to call a doctor. People were amazed and he (PBUH) would say:

"There is a remedy for every malady and when the remedy is applied to the disease it is cured with the permission of Allāh (SWT), the exalted and glorious."²

Some of the companions asked whether using medicine and preventive measures would change the fate and providence that Allāh (SWT) wanted. The Prophet (PBUH) would answer: "It is Allah's divine decree." When the Prophet (PBUH) himself was sick he used to follow medical prescriptions.

This proves that as early as the 6th century, Islam came with a new concept of sickness which abolished the old concept of demons and sins.

2. Rejection of superstitions such as, tattoo, foretelling, consulting the stars, etc., is one of the great achievements of Islam in the field of medicine. The Prophet (PBUH) said:

"Whoever goes to a fortune teller or a diviner and asks him about anything and has believed what he said he becomes a non-believer in the revelation by Muḥammad."³

Thus Islam divorced medicine from priesthood in an age when medicine was mixed with jugglery.

3. Islam legislated a law to protect the medical profession from quacks and at the same time to protect the practicing physician from consequences of committing professional mistakes. The Prophet (PBUH) said:

"Whoever practices medical treatment without being known to possess the requisite experience would be responsible, for the loss suffered by the patient."⁴

This saying is exactly what we know today as medical licensing and medical liability. It states clearly the responsibility for professional mistakes. Contemporary laws protect the specialist from the results of diagnostic therapeutic errors as long as they were

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not the result of negligence or inadequate experience.

4. Islam encourages specialization in the medical profession. The Prophet (PBUH) said:

“Which of you is the more skilled physician in treating this ailment?”⁵

5. Islam declared an important scientific fact, every illness has its remedy, and even if some illnesses have no cure now, it is because of our lack of knowledge about it. Hence we should try to achieve such knowledge.
6. Islam considers cleanliness obligatory upon Muslims. Personal hygiene was considered a measure for prevention of illness and is a part of faith. Islam rejects the notion that dirt (uncleanliness) is a sign of modesty or a way of approaching Allāh. Islam pointed to pollution of food, clothes and encourages purification. Islam defined “Najāsah” i.e. impurity, uncleanliness, and identified its elements; pus, urine, stools, vomitus, saliva of dogs, the body of the pig, etc. Islam also defines “Tahārah” i.e. cleanliness, purity as freedom from “Najāsah”. Purification can be achieved by means such as washing by running water, burning by fire, boiling in water, drying, etc.

Islam did not only discuss cleanliness in general terms but rather in full detail describing measures to clean each part of the body. This shows that Islam laid the ground work both in concept and practice of preventive medicine.†

7. Thanks to Islamic teachings, Muslims used for the first time anesthetics in surgery. Before Islam, the only known anesthetic was wine. Its prohibition in Islam was a motive for Muslim scientists to search for alternative methods, such as Arabic hemp.
8. Islam was the first to realize the infectious nature of diseases and prescribe isolation as a means of their control. “A disease carrier should not introduce himself to a healthy person.”

This a person suffering from infectious disease should not mix with other people.

9. Islam established a scientific rule to control epidemics such as plague. The Prophet (PBUH) says:

“When you hear about it do not enter there and when it has broken out in a land and you were there, then do not run away from it.”⁶

This is exactly what is followed in cases of epidemics in our modern times.

10. As for genetics and how it effects generation after generation, the Prophet (PBUH) ordered Muslims to select the suitable wife for the seed because this would be transmitted to the new generation.
11. In the book “Story of Medicine” by Joseph Garland, he states how Islam dealt with what is known today as geriatrics. Islam has advanced the care and respect of the old people. The first to mention it from the medical point of view was Ibn Sīnā in his book “The Canon”.⁷ Islamic hospitals had a special ward for aged people.
12. Maternal and child welfare. Islam gave much care and respect to maternity. The rights of pregnant and lactating women were legislated. The rights of infants with respect to care and feeding were also legislated. The science of maternal and child health owes much to the teachings of Islam.

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†For more detailed discussion of this topic refer to JIMA 1987, 19:100.