

## Islamic Perspective

### Prophetic Medicine: ‘A Holistic Approach to Medicine’

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#### Abstract

Al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī, and many others did exhaustive research to collect the sayings and traditions of our beloved Prophet ﷺ into books of ḥadīth. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and al-Dhahabī, two great Islamic scholars, collected reports related to health hygiene, diseases, and remedies from these books into scholarly works for the general populace, who held great reverence and love for Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and desired to know his opinions on every subject, including health and medicine. Never claiming to be a physician himself, and many times directing his companions to seek the help of a doctor, the Prophet ﷺ nonetheless on many occasions was reported to have given advice on simple ailments he encountered. These reports came to be termed as “prophetic medicine.”

In the realm of health, hygiene, prevention, and treatment of maladies, the Prophet ﷺ employed both popular remedies of his time as well as spiritual remedies. The latter comprised recitation of verses of the Glorious Qur’an, supplications or supererogatory prayers on various occasions, with successes recorded by various companions. Thus, his was a true “holistic” approach to problems of health. Prior to Islam, the spiritual aspects of cure were left to the priests, and the treatment of the body was in the domain of medical practitioners. By combining the two, and blending these philosophies together, our Prophet ﷺ can be considered one of the first to use a truly holistic approach to the cure of disease.

**Key words:** Prophetic medicine, holistic medicine, spiritual medicine, Islamic medicine.

**T**he term “prophetic medicine,” although popular among the Muslim masses because of its theological and doctrinal contents, is consid-

ered by most Muslim historians and physicians as distinct from scientific and analytical medicine. They termed the latter “Islamic medicine.”

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Some scholars tend to mix these two genres of medicine that evolved during the Islamic era. However, to most scholars, these entities, although related, are considerably different. Perhaps the earliest one to point out this difference was ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406 CE), a well-known medieval Muslim jurist, historian, and statesman, in his *al-Muqaddima*

(The Introduction). Ibn Khaldūn states:

Civilized Bedouins have a kind of medicine, which is mainly based upon individual experience. They inherit its use from the shaykhs and old women of the tribe. Some of it may occasionally be correct. However, (that kind of medicine) is not based upon any natural norm or upon any conformity (of the treatment) to the temper of the humors. Much of this sort of medicine existed among the Arabs. They had well-known physicians, such as al-Harith b. Kaladah and others. The medicine mentioned in religious tradition is of the (Bedouin) type. It is in no way part of the divine revelation. (Such medical matters) were merely (part of) Arab custom and happened to be mentioned in connection with the circumstances of the Prophet, like other things that were customary in his generation. They were not mentioned in order to imply that that particular way of practicing (medicine) is stipulated by the religious law.<sup>1</sup>

The companions of the Prophet ﷺ transmitted to subsequent generations their reports of his sayings and actions. Later authors compiled collections of these reports, which came to be known as books of ḥadīth. The authors of these collections inquired deeply into the authenticity of the reports. Some used subject headings to organize the collections. The most famous of the ḥadīth collections are those of al-Bukhārī (d. 256 AH/870 CE), Muslim (d. 261/875), and al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892). Muslims regard al-Bukhārī's as the most authentic. The chain of narrators of each report was recorded. Each one of the narrators in the chain was scrutinized in depth to ensure his or her veracity and truthfulness. Degrees of authentication were assigned to each report depending upon the outcome of this in-depth research. Thus, each report underwent this rigorous analysis before being accepted for inclusion in the works of these scholars.<sup>2</sup>

The sayings related to dietary recommendations and restrictions, general health and hygiene, first aid measures, and treatment of minor ailments are grouped together in one chapter dealing with health matters. Some later Islamic jurists and scholars

embarked on a study of the Hadith collections dealing with health-related matters in much greater depth and detail and wrote elaborate commentaries on them. These collections were then made available to the Muslim populace as “prophetic medicine,” or *al-Ṭibb-al-Nabawī*. One such collection is *Zād al-mī'ād* (Provisions for the hereafter) by Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr ibn Ayyūb, commonly known as ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (691/1292-753/1350). The other fairly comprehensive and authentic collection is one by al-Dhahabī, whose full name is Abū Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Dhahābī, a famous traditionalist and historian. According to Fazlur Rahman, “he concentrates more on religious doctrine while others mainly give prescriptions.”<sup>3</sup> Most recent works rely on ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and several contemporary translations of the original works have been done. The ones derived from authentic sources and manuscripts are *Medicine of the Prophet*, translated by Penelope Johnson,<sup>4</sup> and *Natural Healing with the Medicine of the Prophet*, translated by Mohammed Al-Akili.<sup>5</sup>

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya was a great Islamic scholar with in-depth knowledge of Qur'anic commentaries, Islamic jurisprudence, and the Hadith. Thus his collections bear credence in regard to their authenticity. He was not only a theologian but also a practicing physician. He affirms that the Prophet was guided by divine providence and hence his words, if authenticated, should be regarded with utmost respect. However, ibn al-Qayyim stated that they have to be taken within the context that these sayings and traditions are not divine injunctions or proscriptions but are meant to guide the followers to a common sense approach to health and disease problems. Many of these suggestions and approaches have been found on detailed analysis to be not only of practical significance but may have a scientific basis as well. Whenever we can we will endeavor to illustrate these points by giving examples in the discussion below.

While discussing the relationship between prophetic medicine and scientific medicine, ibn al-Qayyim argues that prophetic medicine deals with the overall principles, while scientific medicine fills in the details. According to Penelope Johnson, this assertion is based on ibn al-Qayyim's concept of the nature of man as a body and a spirit. She writes that ibn al-Qayyim argues that:

The relationship of (scientific) medicine to the prophetic medicine is similar to scientific thought in comparison to divine revelations (to the Prophets). Indeed there are scientific phenomena and medical therapies to which even the best scientist and doctors have no real answers. Even to this day despite the advances made by science and technology many mysteries remain. The results and comfort of spiritual therapies comes only from faith and trust in God. They come through charity, prayer, repentance and seeking God's forgiveness. They are aided by doing good deeds, helping the helpless and relieving the afflicted. The causes for these cures are varied and defy logical analysis. And the resultant cures cannot be explained by scientific experimentation and analysis. All this is in accordance of the law of God and nothing outside it. When a person's heart becomes attuned to the Lord of the world, and trusting of the Creator of all ailments and their remedies, medicines which would otherwise be ineffective in an individual who is unbelieving and indifferent of heart become effective. It has been experienced that when a man's belief is strong, his body and soul are strengthened and they co-operate in repelling disease and overcoming it. This cannot be denied except by the most ignorant of people.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Fazlur Rahman writes in his chapter on prophetic medicine:

The integrality of the health of the whole person: spiritual, psychological, physical and moral - is the essence of the message of prophetic medicine.<sup>3</sup>

Muslim scholars saw the collection and transmission of medical knowledge as acts of piety, since the Prophet ﷺ identified health as important and, by relying on the healers of his time and their treatments, established that their craft was religiously valid and beneficial.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the important narrations of God's Messenger ﷺ related to sickness are related in Sahih Muslim. On the authority of Jabir ibn

'Abdullah, it is reported that Allah's Messenger ﷺ said:

لِكُلِّ دَاءٍ دَوَاءٌ فَإِذَا أُصِيبَ دَوَاءُ الدَّاءِ بَرَأَ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ

There is a remedy for every malady, and when the remedy is applied to the disease, it is cured by permission of Allah, the Exalted and Glorious.<sup>6,7</sup>

Thus, a Muslim always endeavors to find a causation of disease. The implication is that if a cause for a disease has not yet been found, one needs to keep on looking for it until one is found.

Al-Imam Aḥmad reported on the authority of Usāma ibn Shurayk that:

فجاءت الأعراب فسألوه فقالوا يا رسول الله  
نتداوى قال نعم تداووا فإن الله لم يضع داء إلا  
وضع له دواء غير داء واحد الهرم

Some nomads came and asked 'O Messenger of Allah, should we treat the sick?' He replied: 'Yes O servants of Allah treat your sick for Allah the Glorious One did not make any disease, without making a cure for it, except one, old age.'<sup>8</sup>

A much-quoted hadith regarding overindulgence in eating is that one should never fill up one's stomach with food. The best proportion for eating recommended was one-third for food, another for water, and the remainder left empty.<sup>9</sup> This would make perfect sense in modern-day society where obesity is a running pandemic!

Broadly speaking, prophetic medicine has been divided into physical medicine, the treatment of the physical body, and spiritual medicine, the treatment of the soul. The equal importance assigned to each implies a holistic approach to the treatment of a human being. On many occasions the Prophet relied upon the blessings of prayer as well as the verses of the Glorious Qur'an to provide relief from an illness.

Imām Aḥmad reported on the authority of Abū Khūzāma Ya`mar ibn al-Ḥārith:

سألت رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم رأيت دواء  
نتداوى به ورقى نسترقى بها وتقى نتقيها أترد من  
قدر الله تبارك وتعالى شيئاً قال إنها من قدر الله  
تبارك وتعالى

I [Abū Khūzāma] asked the Messenger of Allah ‘Would you consider the medicine we take and the talismans we use and the other precautions we take to which we have recourse a suitable means of treatment? Do they turn back anything in Allah’s decree? The Prophet ﷺ replied: ‘They are a part of Allah’s decree.’<sup>10</sup>

Most books on prophetic medicine are filled with prescriptions and advice. Some have mystical potions, talismans, recitations, and rituals. They are all linked to a deep faith and strong belief. The intended audience was the common man, the little educated or the unlearned, who did not have access to scientific medicine. Whether learned or not, the greatest appeal of these books is to those that have a deep faith and high reverence for Allah ﷻ and his beloved Prophet ﷺ. Thus, it was the aim of these books to reach a universal audience and spread common household and day-to-day remedies and not necessarily scientific remedies. They also encouraged consciousness of preventive measures in promotion of health and hygiene. Most of these books on prophetic medicine have been authored not by learned and practicing doctors, but by theologians and religious leaders.

### Conclusion

Our Prophet ﷺ, acting under divine guidance, was able in his daily life to set broad guidelines for the use of household remedies (like honey), the usefulness of dietary discretion, the use of herbal remedies (like the black seed or nigella sativa) and give the valuable advice of keeping away from areas afflicted by epidemics or contagion (like the plague). In addition, the Prophet ﷺ used ritual prayer, supplications, talismans, and the recitation of Qur’anic verses to invoke blessings on persons afflicted with

illness or bitten by insects or scorpions. By documented accounts, the Prophet ﷺ was able to ameliorate or cure their afflictions, thus pointing to the holistic nature of medicine, an approach that only recently is gaining scientific recognition and acceptance.

As practicing physicians we should not endorse or reject remedies assembled in books of prophetic medicine because there is not enough research done to prove or disprove their efficacy. We should believe that in general terms prayers, supplications and talismans are effective when combined with conventional remedies as they positively effect the psyche of the patient, especially the one with deep faith.

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