

History of Medicine

Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a: The Physician Historian

Husain F. Nagamia, MD, FRCS

Chairman, International Institute of Islamic Medicine

Chief Emeritus, Cardiovascular Thoracic Surgery

Cardiac Institute of Florida, Tampa General Hospital

*Clinical Assistant Professor of Surgery, University of South Florida Medical School
Tampa, Florida*

Abstract:

Most Muslim physicians have heard (or should have heard) about famous Muslim physicians such as al-Rāzī, al-Majūsī, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Nafīs, and Ibn Sīnā, but few physicians have heard about Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a. Although not as famous as some of his contemporaries, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a is no less important than any of these, considering the contributions he made to the history of Islamic medicine. His biography, the important contributions he made, and his rightful high place in the history of Islamic medicine will be presented.

Key words: History of medicine, Islamic medicine, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a.

Most Muslim physicians have heard (or should have heard) about famous Muslim physicians such as al-Rāzī, al-Majūsī, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Nafīs, and Ibn Sīnā, but very few physicians have heard about Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a. So then why am I writing about this not-so-famous physician? Although not as famous as some of his contemporaries, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a is no less important than any of these, considering the contributions he made to the history of Islamic medicine. In this monograph, I will examine his biography, the important contributions he made, and his rightful high place in the history of Islamic medicine.

Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a's full name was Muwaffaq al-Dīn Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn al-Qāsim ibn Khalīfa ibn Yūnus al-Khazarjī. He was born in Damascus in 599 AH (1203 CE) to a family that had close ties with medicine. His father was an oculist, a noble medical specialty of his time. His uncle was a brilliant physician who became a famous teacher of medicine at a young age. His uncle spoke Turkish fluently, commanding a wide expansive knowledge. He was not only a physician but a musician, poet, and oculist as well. No

doubt both these men had great influence on the young Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a. His early education was under the tutelage of his father and uncle. He studied with some very notable teachers of his time. Ibn al-Bayṭār, the famed botanist, taught him botany.¹ Later he took apprenticeship under Muhadhdhab al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥīm ibn 'Alī, known as al-Dakhwār, physician-in-chief at the then world-famous Nūrī hospital in Damascus. Among his pupils was Ibn al-Nafīs, the discoverer of pulmonary circulation, who became known as the second Ibn Sīnā. Later, Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a traveled to Cairo to take up a medical and surgical residency at the famous al-Nāṣirī hospital. After finishing his training, he returned to Syria and started practicing in Ṣalkhad in southeastern Syria in the service of the town's governor 'Izz al-Dīn Abū al-Manṣūr Aḥmad ibn 'Abdullah. He remained there practicing until he died in 668 AH (1270 CE).

Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a is the author of several works, including a lot of poetry. Unfortunately most of these have been lost. It was during this time that he wrote the book 'Uyūn al-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā' that was to earn him fame as an enduring historian

of his time.² *Uyūn al-Anbā'* is a history of the physicians known at his time. Thus, he painted a great picture of the art and science of medicine of his time and the preceding times and gave us great insights. There is no other work that even comes close in describing the physicians of that time, their detailed biographies, the way they practiced, the medical and surgical methods they used and their philosophies, sometimes even their eccentricities, oddities and also some of their ingenious methods and achievements. Because of its fame and importance, this book has survived almost in its entirety rather than being altered by annotations of subsequent copyists as has happened to many other books and manuscripts of that time.

Dr. Sami Hamarneh, a modern day authority on the history of Islamic medicine, wrote "In scope and details, it is the best of its kind ever written up to the early modern period. It is monumental undertaking in the history of Islamic medicine, serving as an indispensable reference and source of information, for the study and understanding of the rise and development of the health professions from ancient times to mid 660 AH (1262 CE)."³

From the descriptions in this book, it is evident that the author, in addition to knowing medicine well, was refined, cultured, honest in his accounts and detailed in his statements. He was objective, precise, critical, and free from prejudice. Included in his description are philosophical sayings by physicians,

aphorisms, anecdotes, medical poetry, and even humorous encounters, which make for delightful reading.

His book was dedicated to Abū al-Ḥasan ibn Ghazal ibn Abī Sa'īd, the wazīr of the King al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn.

Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a thus deserves a high place in the list of historians of medicine. From his descriptions we learn a lot about the early Greek physicians including Hippocrates, Galen, the Greco-Roman, the Byzantine, the Alexandrian, and the early Muslim physicians. In his book he covered practitioners in Iraq, Diyār Bakr (a region on both banks of the upper Tigris), India, North Africa and Spain (Maghrib), countries far removed from where he practiced. He also covered Egypt and the country of his residence, Syria, in great depth.

References

1. Vernet J. Ibn al-Bayṭār. In Lewis B, Ménage VL, Pellat C, Schacht J et al (editors). *Encyclopedia of Islam (New Edition)*. Vol. 3. Brill: Leiden and Boston; 1986.
2. Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'a. *Uyūn al-Anbā' fī Ṭabaqāt al-Aṭibbā'*. Müller A (editor). Cairo and Königsberg: al-Maṭba'a al-Wahbiyya, 1882-1884.
3. Hamarneh S. Arabic historiography as related to the health professions in medieval Islam. *Sudhoffs Arch.* 1966;50(1):2-24.