
Medical Ethics, Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: The technological advances of today's medical practice are something in which man can take pride, but they have brought us face to face with such questions as what is life and what is death and what is the purpose of life. Ethical and moral values have been challenged like never before. Since Islam is a comprehensive 'deen' offering us guidance in all aspects of life, we expect Islam to give us guidance for the present day dilemmas faced by humanity because of these new medical/technological advances. As Muslims and physicians, it is our responsibility to search for answers to questions such as the permissibility of cloning. If it is permissible, is the clone a sibling or a child? What is the role of surrogate mothers? Are biotechnical parenting methods making use of sperm and ova banks permissible? This calls for our deliberate indulgence in the time-honored rules of *sharī'a* (Islamic law) to arrive at certain workable guiding principles. There have been previous attempts at discussions of these and other subjects that resulted in solving some of these problems, but many remain unsolved and need further discussion. I suggest annual programs for holding ethics conferences attended by prominent *sharī'a* and medical scholars to discuss these subjects. The outcomes of these conferences can be published and disseminated. I suggest taking advantage of the Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTECH) of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) for helping in this direction. I also recommend the introduction of the subject of ethics in all medical schools in Muslim countries. Modern communication technology can be utilised effectively and inexpensively. I urge the Islamic Medical Association of North America (IMANA) and the Federation of Islamic Medical Associations (FIMA) to look into these suggestions urgently.

Key Words: Islamic Medical ethics, Shariah, Medical school teaching

Dictionaries define ethics as the study of the general nature of morals and moral choices. A second definition is the rules and standards governing the conduct of a profession. In the case of the medical profession, both of these are equally applicable. In the medical practice the physician has to follow a code of ethical and moral standards, and certain professional standards must be maintained relating to the practice. This is imperative at least from two angles. The first is the special relationship (apothecary) between two human beings. The second is its pertinence to life and death questions.

Islam offers a comprehensive 'road-map' for all aspects of human behavior and therefore we expect that it must determine the rules and regulations for proper conduct in this profession. The physician is therefore expected not only to be God-fearing and

chaste but should be observant of all moral codes in his/her professional behavior as well.

The physicians of the golden era of the Islamic civilization strongly emphasized ethics, as seen in the writings of 'Ishāq Ibn 'Ali Al-Ruhawi,¹ Ibn Miskawayh² and Maimonides's prayer.³ Even the older medical traditions reflect this emphasis on ethics, for example, the Hippocrates Oath and the Hindu Physicians Oath. If we glance through the *Adab Ṭabīb* (Ethics for a physician) written by Al-Ruhawi, we can see his ethical concerns about the ninth century medical profession. That deontological treatise covers all aspects of medical practice of his time, and these are comparable with those of today, such as proper qualifications of the practitioner, choice of drugs, avoidance of harm and the dignity of the physician himself. There is no doubt however that the present day advances have generated a whole new set of ethical issues for us. While we are trying to define such basic questions as when does life begin and when does it end, we are also confronted with unique situations. For example, what should a human clone be called, a child or a sibling?

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Who is the mother? Is she the surrogate who gave birth to the baby or the one who supplied the ovum? How should the sale of human ova or sperms or even whole babies be regulated?

Surely, we as humans have crossed some forbidden boundaries of nature. Iqbal, the poet of the east, warned about such a transgression.⁴ The question of who decides what is right and what is wrong is being taken up by the feeble human intellect for proclamation. Islamic teachings must be introduced to all peoples of the world now, and we must adhere to the golden rules given to us by our Creator Himself⁵ in the form of the Book (al-Qur'ān) and its master interpreter and teacher, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). There is only one who decides what is right and what is wrong, the Creator Himself. Islamic jurisprudence is derived from the two sources cited above, the Glorious Qur'ān and the Sunnah (the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), his doings and sayings), along with *'ijtihād* (Islamic scholar exerting his own intellect for an answer to a problem) and *'ijmā'* (the consensus of scholars) adding and supplementing the methodology.⁶ It seems to me that given these circumstances, it is important that today's Muslim physician needs to be a bit more knowledgeable about *sharī'a* than before. This is also a good reason to start teaching the basic rules of ethics at medical schools in Muslim countries.

Ethical understanding has been always there. It has been an integral part of the bed-side teachings in all medical schools. At the bedside we have learnt from our teachers the behavior expected of the physician, such as the gentle approach to taking the patient's history, performing physical examination and ensuring the presence of a chaperon for special examinations, especially when examination is performed on patients of the opposite sex. This education has become insufficient. Now we need more knowledge of the use and abuse of advanced technologies such as automatic respirators and cardiac pacemakers. We now clearly are in need of a more comprehensive document giving us all these details in order to become more efficient and more competent in arriving at better decisions, helping families make more prudent and appropriate decisions for their loved ones, and guiding patients in the formulation of more practical advanced directives.

There are documented accounts of proceedings available on some ethical matters from some Muslim countries, for example, the proceedings published by the Islamic Organization of Medical Sciences based in Kuwait. There have been similar conferences in Morocco and Jordan. The ethical issues discussed, including those agreed upon as far as Islamic position goes, were a part of a discussion of the Islamic medical tradition. I know of no conference specifically held for ethical concerns to be sorted out between the Islamic and the Muslim medical scholars. That calls for such dedicated conferences for specific ethical issues to be arranged in the Muslim world where Islamic scholars (world renowned *'ulamā'* and *fuqahā'*) from different parts of the world and also from different schools of thought (*madhāhib*) can get together at the same table as medical scholars in appropriate disciplines such as obstetrics and gynecology, neurology/neurosurgery, pulmonary medicine and so on.

My plea is to 'create' a body of such Islamic scholars by choosing from the present Muslim world's known ones and group them together under some caption such as "Ulama for Medical Ethics". These *'ulamā'* should be prepared to address these ethical questions. As for the medical scholars, I feel it should be a responsibility of the Islamic Medical Association of North America (IMANA) and the Federation of Islamic Medical Associations (FIMA) to enlist them, organize conferences with selected subjects, and maintain logs of the proceedings. These conferences should be on a yearly basis as an ongoing exercise. I am confident that after some years we should be able to make intelligent, coherent statements about these difficult ethical questions.

Maybe this will be the beginning of *'ijtihād*, which is sorely needed for the Islamic world. This is by no means a need which has arisen only recently. Two hundred years ago, Shah Wali-ullah Dehlawi wrote "It is needed today."⁷ I feel that half-hearted attempts at occasional discussion on ethical issues are inadequate and unacceptable. We are aware of some subjects having been discussed thoroughly and conclusions considered acceptable, for example, brain death.⁸ However, there remains a host of undecided questions, such as those of stem cell,

cloning, or some issues of end-of-life care, etc. that need to be addressed soon. I am not enumerating all here as every list will be insufficient by the time it is looked at or published.

International communication should pose no problem in the present day, given the technologically advanced resources available to the Ummah. We in the USA are already experiencing the benefits of "telemedicine". The digital and computerized technology applied to television sources makes so much sense and the *'ulamā'* do not even have to leave home in order to participate in the conferences.

I have one suggestion, and it may not necessarily be the only one to act upon. That is related to the Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTECH), the "science and technology" arm of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC, <http://www.oic-oci.org/>). This "arm" has existed since 1983 and is currently functioning well. Its central secretariat is located in Islamabad, Pakistan. It has the technological ability to assist us in this matter. COMSTECH's mechanism for achieving its objectives is stated on its web site: "COMSTECH works in collaboration and cooperation with its member states and maintains working relationship with scientific and technological institutions of the OIC region. It also maintains liaison with the general secretariat of the OIC at Jeddah. It has cooperative arrangements with many international institutions."⁹

I also feel strongly that in all the medical schools in the Muslim world the subject of ethics must be introduced, consisting of basic information given over 10-12 lectures. I invite the IMANA/FIMA academia to elaborate more on this as I know they are all well aware of this concern.

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