

# ETHIQUE MEDICALE/MEDICAL ETHICS

## SOURCES AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF ARABIC MEDICAL ETHICS\*

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Haddad FS. Sources and contributions of Arabic medical ethics. *Leb Med J* 2005 ; 53 (3) : 182-185.

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### INTRODUCTION

Medical ethics assumed a central place in the Arabic writings on medicine. Almost every Arabic medical book contains a chapter or a section on medical ethics. Some authors (like alruhAwy) [1] have even written a whole monograph devoted solely to the subject

When they wrote about medical ethics, the Arabic-writing physicians used the word "AdAb" which is more inclusive than the word "ethics" used before them and after them. The word "AdAb altabyb" is not restricted to the narrow meaning of "ethics," but it includes the behavior and conduct of the physician, his attire, his manners, and his relations to patients, colleagues, pharmacists, nurses, and visitors. It is also concerned with the social and financial aspects of the provision of health care, as well as with medical education and the continuing education of the physician.

### SOURCES

There are three main sources for the study of Arabic medical ethics :

- 1) Historical events
- 2) Ideas of the great Arabic philosophers
- 3) Arabic medical texts

#### I. Historical events

"AdAb altabyb," the physician's ethics, was not only discussed in the medical books, but it was also reflected in a series of instances of exemplary behavior of famous physicians, the story of which was told over and over again as an example to be followed by the rank and file.

I have chosen five stories to illustrate how certain events are intimately related to the subject of medical ethics.

(1) In the early history of Islam, during the period of wars, the great Caliph "umar ibn alJattAb," the satisfaction of God be upon him, established, after the battle

of Jaybar (628 AD), a new institution called the "waqf" and endowed it with some domains he acquired after the battle, with the definite proscription that these domains should not be sold nor transmitted by inheritance [2] but should be kept as a foundation for the poor, the slaves, and the travelers. This legal institution remains to this very day an important pillar of socio-financial endeavors in many cultures and judicial systems. Anyone can put in perpetual and irrevocable trust property he possesses, the fruits of which are utilized for charitable and lofty purposes that the person himself prescribes in the waqf-deed [3]. This institution has had a tremendous effect and a widespread influence on all aspects of Arab economy, and particularly on the availability of innumerable charitable health institutions and hospitals all throughout history.

(2) The second story is that of *jirjus bakhtyaCw`* who was a Nestorian physician brought from *jundiCâpwr* to Bagdad to treat Caliph *almanSwr* in 765 AD. One day the Caliph asked him : "Who is looking after you ?" – "My students," answered the physician. "I heard," said the Caliph, "that you have no wife." – "I have an old wife too weak to travel from where she lives." On learning this, the Caliph ordered his valet *sâlim* to pick three beautiful Byzantine slave girls and send them to *Dr bakhtyaCw`* with 3000 dinars. The valet executed his master's order. When *bakhtyaCw`* returned home and learned from his students what had happened, he sent back the three slaves to the Caliph. The Caliph sent for his physician and asked him : "Why did you return the slaves ?" – "These girls can't stay with me in the same house, because, we Christians take only one wife," answered the doctor. The Caliph gave him a raise and installed him as the physician to his harem. *bakhtyaCw`* thus became, to generations of physicians, the example and the symbol of self-restraint, chastity, and virtue [4, pp 123-5].

(3) The third story is about the grandson of the preceding physician. His name was *jibrâ`yl ibn bakhtyaCw`* (c 785 AD) ; he was also a Nestorian physician. He accompanied, one day, caliph *hârwn alraCyd* (768-809) during a military expedition against the Byzantines, not far from Pergamum. The physician asked permission from the Caliph to go and visit the native home of Galen. The Caliph allowed him to go, and gave him an escort of a thousand cavaliers. This story shows the great respect that physicians had for their great predecessors [4, pp 100-2] and [5].

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\* Presented on 03 06 28, at the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Congress on Medical Ethics at Bursa, Turkey.

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(4) The fourth story shows how immense was the influence of Christian morality on Arabic medical ethics. The physicians of the early Caliphs were preponderantly Christian and were very much attached to the principles and tenets of their religion. This is illustrated by the story of the great *Hunayn* (800-877) ibn isHAq who refused to comply with the demand of the Caliph to prescribe, in the utmost secrecy, a poison to kill an enemy of the Caliph. After one year in prison, *Hunayn* was then asked to chose between compliance with the demand of the Caliph, for which he would be rewarded with 50 000 dirhams, or the executioner's sword. *Hunayn* maintained his refusal, saying : "My profession and my religion prevent me from acceding to your demand." The Caliph smiled and awarded *Hunayn* his complete and most implicit confidence [4, pp 187-8]. *Hunayn* became very famous, and the most celebrated and productive of the translators. He built the solid pillars on which the whole magnificent structure of Arabic medicine stands. The story of his refusal of the Caliph's demand must have been heard and read by scores and scores of Arab students of medicine and Arab physicians for generations and generations, and could not have failed to impress the medical profession. It has most certainly left a great influence on Arab medical ethics.

(5) The fifth story is that of Caliph nASir who fell ill in the year 1201 AD with a stone in the urinary bladder. His condition deteriorated so much that his physician thought best to call for a consultation in view of a surgical operation. The consultant was the famous Christian physician of Bagdād, *abw naSr*, the author of "al'iqtiDAb." He refused to see the patient before he could have a full report from the treating physician (an ethical rule that many wrongly believe is modern). When the consultation was over, the Caliph, suspecting that he had not been properly treated by his previous physician, became so furious that he threatened to put his treating physician on the cross. The consultant came immediately to the rescue of his colleague. He told the Caliph in a most respectful manner : "O master, by the grace of God, and by all your noble forebears, do not make such rules against physicians ; your physician made no mistake in his management, but his luck was bad, and your illness resisted the treatment." Upon these words, the old physician was acquitted. *abw naSr* then undertook the treatment of the Caliph who within three days passed the stone. *abw naSr* was rewarded with 20 000 dirhams [4, p 301].

These five stories, and many similar ones that depict exemplary behavior of famous physicians, must have been told over and over again as examples to be followed by the rank and file.

## II. Arabic philosophers

Many Arabic philosophers were also physicians. Three stand out above the rest by their discussion of the

subject of general ethics : *alkindy*, *alfArAby*, and *ibn synA*. By their general ideas on ethics propounded in their works on philosophy, they greatly influenced the medical ethics of their time

*AlfArAby*, (873-950), for example, was an ascetic and shunned all worldly matters ; he discoursed at length on the subject of reason and ethics [6].

*ibn synA* (980-1037), who was greatly influenced by *alfArAby*, thought that happiness could be reached by forgetting desires, shunning worldly things, stopping oneself from thinking about the illusions of the world, following an honorable path, and rising above material enticements and temptations [7-8].

From a review of these events and from the ideas of the Arabic philosophers on the subject of general ethics, Arabic medical ethics appear to be an amalgam of four major cultural sources : (1) Greek philosophical thought, (2) Christian moral teachings, and (3) Moslem principles and tradition. (4) In the following study of the texts we shall see that Arabic medical ethics was also influenced by a fourth culture, namely traditional Indian wisdom.

## III. Arabic medical texts

*aliy alTabary* (775-850 AD), the teacher of *alrAziy*, quotes **Indian sources** : "the students who are fit to study medicine are those who are healthy and intelligent. They must also be compassionate, charitable, sensitive, indefatigable, devoid of envy, jealousy, anger, laziness, gluttony, gossip or volubility ; they should be clean, good-mannered, self-restrained, chaste, strong-willed, and perseverant."

In his famous "*alkitāb almalaky*" (The Royal Book, [9]), *almajwsi* (d 994) was the first Arabic author to have mentioned the Oath of Hippocrates. He emphasized the importance of preserving the dignity of the medical profession, admonishing the physician to revere his teachers and their sons, providing them with all their needs, and teaching the noble profession to those amongst them who aspire to learn it.

"To be a good physician and learned practitioner," he wrote "one ought to follow the Oath of Hippocrates... In treating the sick, one should not be interested in money but rather in godly reward and recompense. One should not give, prescribe, indicate nor mention a poison to anyone."

The famous *ibn abiy uSaybi'a* (1270 AD), the greatest Arab historian of medicine, gave an authentic Arabic version of the **Hippocratic Oath** in his book [4, pp 25-6] ; I translated this version into English 23 years ago [3].

### CONTRIBUTIONS (NEW ETHICAL PRINCIPLES NOT FOUND IN THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH)

By reviewing the Arabic medical texts at my disposal, I found that six Arabic authors and physicians have added at least five new principles to the Hippocratic Oath ; here are their recommendations :

(1) In the book of *alruhAwiy* (8??) I found that he recommends the necessity for the physician to **continue to read** and to participate in scientific meetings. Continuing medical education, an idea thought to be a modern American innovation, was discussed at length by several authors of Arabic medical texts.

According to *ibn raDfwAn* (998-1061) dean of the physicians of Cairo, the physician should **continue to learn** with assiduity.

*albagdAdy* (1162-1231) wrote : “Every evening you should examine your conscience to obtain the balance of your actions, to thank God for the good actions and ask forgiveness for the bad ones, and to foresee the good ones for the morrow asking God’s help.” Acquiring a science is not sufficient, says he, one has to increase one’s competence by further reading, studying, discussing, teaching, and writing about it [4, pp 208-12].

(2) *aly alTabary* (775-850 AD), the teacher of *alrāziy*, inspired by Hippocrates, wrote in his “*firdaws al-Hikmat*” (Paradise of Wisdom, [10]) a description of the good physician : “He should not smell bad, nor should he be preceded by perfume, nor depraved nor conspicuous by his dress.”

*alruhAwiy* (8??) seems to have been the earliest physician known to write in Arabic specifically and extensively on medical ethics. His book is entitled “*adab alTabayb*” and comprises 20 chapters in 223 pages. It was translated into English in 1967 [1]. *alruhAwiy* quotes at length several Greek authors (some of whom we only know from his quotes), and Arabic authors. He was meticulous and comprehensive in his work, loyally giving credit where credit is due and providing us with accurate and inestimable references. He mentions compassion, profound understanding of the patient’s problems, qualities of the spirit and the heart, moderation, the mastering of the instincts, and the rejection of worldly pleasures as qualities required of all physicians. He devoted a whole chapter of his book to the exterior **physical appearance** of the physician (cleanliness, dress, etc).

Another physician, *ibn raDwAn*, emphasized the personal appearance of the physician ; he wrote that the physician should be healthy in body and mind, intelligent, wise, having a good memory and a happy disposition ; he should be **well dressed and well groomed** [4, p 101].

*ibn butlAn* (d 1063), the famous physician from *bagdAd*, wrote indirectly about medical ethics by satirizing quacks and their ways. In his exquisite book entitled “*da`wat al`atibba`*” (The physicians’ banquet, [11]) he ridiculed the unnecessarily lavish clothes of some physicians of his time, painting the scene where poor patients coming with their urine flasks were embarrassed and hesitated to approach the superbly clad physicians.

(3) *alTabariy* wrote in his book entitled “*firdaws alHikmat*” [10] a description of the good physician : “In everything, he should choose the best and the most judi-

*cious. He should not be intrepid, verbose, light, proud, or disparaging. He should not be infatuated with himself nor place himself above others. He should not disclose nor expose the mistakes of other physicians, but should cover up their errors.*” This is the first time we meet this new principle of “**collegial solidarity.**”

(4) *ibn raDwAn* wrote in his book entitled “*Honor of the physician*” : “I will be humble in the practice of my profession, I will help the needy, I will have no other ambition in this but the pleasure of doing good. I will keep the imperfections of my patients secret and I will thrive to express only indispensable talk.”

(5) *ibn raDwAn* added another new principle to the Hippocratic Oath : The physician will **treat** with as much sincerity **his enemy** as he would his friend.

To make this selection of Arabic medical texts as complete as possible, the contributions of *almajwsi* and of *ibn butlAn* should be mentioned.

*Almajwsi* wrote : “The physician should be pure, intelligent, ethical, God-fearing, gentle of tongue, good mannered and far from eavesdropping, frivolity, and intrigue. He should not divulge the patient’s secrets to anyone, be it a relative or a distant person ; many patients hide their ailments from their parents and their relatives and confide in their physicians ...

“The medical student should frequent the hospital and discuss the patients’ problems and the course of their diseases with the learned physicians ; he should constantly follow their symptoms and the course of their disease remembering what he had already read about similar cases and their prognoses. By doing all this, he would achieve a great deal and would win the confidence, the love and the respect of the people ; besides, he will not fail to benefit and gain therefrom.”

*ibn butlAn* relates in his book the story about the dichotomous physician that is so true to life. He describes a physician who not only has an understanding with a drugstore keeper ; but also employs many other subterfuges, and uses many intricate ways to achieve his devious end.

One of *ibn butlAn*’s aphorisms, is : “Nothing is more detrimental to the patient than a physician who is more gifted in talking than in providing medical care.”

## CONCLUSION

The following new principles which are not found in the Hippocratic Oath were added by Arab physicians :

- Continued medical education (*alruhAwiy*, *ibn raDwAn*, and *albagdAdy*) ;
- The physician’s dress, manners, and finances (*alruhAwiy*, *ibn raDwAn*, and *ibn butlAn*) ;
- Collegial solidarity (*alTabary* and *abw naSr*) ;
- Charitable behavior (*ibn raDwAn*) ;
- Treating the enemy (*ibn raDwAn*).