The Humane Physician: An Islamic Perspective

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Disclaimer

• Not an “expert” on Islam.
• Interested in the issues related to Islamic Medical Ethics and have done some work related to this area
• This presentation is based on two papers
  • The Muslim Physician and the Ethics of Medicine; *Journal of Islamic Medical Association* 2010, vol. 42, pp. 111-115
In this presentation

• I will limit myself mainly to what it means to be a humane physician based on the Qur’an although there are other sources that are important to Muslim thinkers.
Islamic Science and Medicine go back to long time ago..
Islamic Medicine: 1000 years ahead of its times

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The extent to which Islamic medicine advanced in the fields of medical education, hospitals, bacteriology, medicine, anesthesia, surgery, pharmacy, ophthalmology, psychotherapy and psychosomatic diseases are presented briefly.
Medical Ethics in Islam

• Is not a simple question of *Haram* and *Halal*

• It is wrong to assume that (particularly with what is now called the Arab Spring) that we have more important things on our mind like democratization, poverty, etc.

• Matters pertaining to Medical Ethics are issues we cannot afford to brush aside any longer as they touch our everyday lives and we have a moral duty to think about them.

• أَلْتَفْكَرُ وَطَلِبُ العلم are important virtues.
What does it take?

- Often, upon reflecting on the life of Mohammad, the prophet of Islam (pbuh), people wonder whether such a person can actually exist these days, amidst the turmoil of a modern life characterized by pluralism, commercialism, deprofessionalization, market forces, egoism and dehumanization. These forces are so overwhelming and powerful that they made their way to one of the noblest professions on earth: medicine.

- Many physicians these days are accused of being materialistic, heartless and machiavellian.
Starting Point

• “Verily this Qur’an Doth guide to that Which is most right (or stable), And giveth the glad tidings To the Believers who work Deeds of righteousness, That they shall have A magnificent reward” (Quran, 17:9)
Public perception about physicians in Lebanon

A study assessing the public perception regarding physicians in Lebanon revealed the following:

The physician traits most desired by the public were found to be: moral traits (41%), interpersonal traits (36%), scientific traits (19%) and other (4%).

The most unwanted traits/behaviours were a lack of interpersonal traits (57%), a lack of moral traits (40%) and a lack of scientific skills (3%).

- Inhumane
- Negligent
- Does not admit mistakes
- Dishonest
- Hurried
- Does not discuss with patients
- Unfriendly
- Treats patients as a number or case
- Disrespectful
- Arrogant:
  - Does not respect appointments
  - High-handed
  - Treat patients as inferior
  - Pretentious
  - Annoyed with questions
  - Does not listen to patients

- Humane
- Honest
- Ethical
- Not materialistic
- Compassionate
- Humble
- God fearing
- Explains thoroughly
- Good listener
- Respects patients
- Has good interpersonal skills
- Gives time to patients
- Caring
- Patient
- Smiles
- Is not haughty

**Not Desired**

**Desired**
Sample remarks

Contestation: The Muslim Physician who follows the dictates of Islam cannot but be a good physician. So too in Christianity I presume.

- ‘Doctors in general are ok, but you find some that want to make money only.’
- ‘Curing patients is second on the list. First comes making money.’
- ‘Doctors these days are robots, they have no heart!’
- ‘They reduce medicine to a cold lifeless prescription.’
- ‘The medical sector has no ethics at all.’
- ‘Doctors are pretentious and full of themselves. They have no consideration for our feelings!’
- ‘I do not trust doctors in Lebanon and, in my opinion; doctors are inhumane merchants.’
What does it take?

Character traits of the humane and virtuous physician are already embedded in the Qur’an and the Sunna. As such, the Muslim physician, guided by these two primary sources of Islamic law will possesses the necessary character traits of a good physician. This, in turn, will lead to a healthy physician-patient relationship and will safeguard the profession of medicine from the demise awaiting it.
“Many people say it is the intellect which makes a great scientist. They are wrong: it is character.”
What does it mean to be a Muslim Physician?

• To follow the Qur’an and the Sunnah in one’s undertakings- personal and professional.
• One cannot be virtuous in part!
The Qur’an

• The Holy Book of Islam.
• Series of revelations that Muhammad (pbuh) was given by God via His messenger the archangel Jibreel (Gabriel) when the prophet was 40 years of age.
• Divided into 114 Suras (chapters) that contain ayat (verses).

Islamic ethics has its roots in basically two primary sources of law, namely the Qur’an and the Sunna.
A third source is often invoked: *Ijtihad* “the right of further interpreting the Qur’an and the *Sunna* or of forming a new opinion by applying analogy.”*

However, the door for *Ijtihad* was closed for the Sunni community and left open for the Shi’ite community only, for the Sunnites feared its slippery ground. As an alternative to *Ijtihad*, the Sunnites resorted to what is known as *Ijma*’ (consensus) or consensus, considered to be as a “most useful theological expedient which has enabled members to adapt their institutions and beliefs to varied and novel situations in a changing world.”**

*Moral obligation in Islam has four sources: the Qur’an, the *Sunna, Ijma*’ (consensus) and *Qias* (analogy) with reference to a case presented either in the Qur’an or the *Sunna.*


Islamic ethics instructs human beings that, in addition to being virtuous, they must contribute to the moral health of society as a whole:

“Ye are the best of Peoples, Evolved For mankind. Enjoining what is right, Forbidding what is wrong And believing in Allah” (Qur’an, 3:110).

كنتم خير أمة أخرجت لناس تؤمنون بالله و تأمرون بالمعروف وتنهون عن المنكر.
Role Models

• Modern theories of character development often point to the importance of role models.

• In Islamic tradition, the typical role model of moral behavior is found in the prophet Mohammad (pbuh) who is often considered to be the *kudwah* or the example to be followed.

• His teachings inspire the lives of people (mainly Muslims) with virtue, good manners and moderation.

> عن أبي هريرة قال قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: أكمل المؤمنين إيمانا أحسنهم خلقًا. 

> "Abū Hurayra narrated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: He was the best of the believers, the most sincere in faith and the best of creation."
He is the incarnation of the Aristotelian *phrominos* with his ability to think about practical matters, possession of *phronesis* and good moral judgment. He is a temperate being who avoids excesses and deficiencies and knows how to accomplish a good and worthwhile life. He strikes the golden mean in the events of daily life: a role model and a teacher. Put simply, an inspiration, an exemplar to emulate. In the Qur’an we read:

“And surely thou hast Sublime morals”

(Al-Qalam 68:4)
Character

- One of the verses (ayat) of the Qur’an that summarizes the character of the Muslim is found in the surat al-Nahl:

  "Surely Allah enjoins justice, kindness and doing of good, to kith and kin, and forbids all that is shameful, evil and oppressive. He exhorts you so that you may be mindful." (Qur’an 16:90)

How does all this translate to the character of the physician?
The true Muslim physician cannot but be a good physician precisely because the moral obligation in Islam as set by the Qur’an make him/her a certain kind of being who will not favour one patient over the other but treat all patients equally (Qur’an, 5:42;)

“إِنَّ حَكَمَتَ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَهُم بِالْقِسْطِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ

“If you judge, judge in equity between them. For Allah loveth those Who judge in equity.”
The physician will restrain and curtail his/her desires if they go contrary to reason and morality (Qur’an. 79:40-41)

وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ وَنَهَى النَّفْسَ عَنَ الْهَوَى فَإِنَّ الْجَنَّةَ هِيَ المَأْوَى

“And for such as had Entertained the fear Of standing before Their Lord’s (tribunal) And had restrained (Their) soul from lover Desires. Their Abode will be The Garden.”
• The Muslim (physician) will not abuse his/her status just for monetary gai. He/she will avoid wrongdoing and be honest because God does not love the liars and wrongdoers (Qur’an, 4:107)

"Contend not on behalf of such as betray Their own souls; For Allah loveth not One given to perfidy And sin"
He/she should not mislead his/her patients (Qur’an, 2:42)

وَلا تَّلْبِسْوا الْحَقَّ بِالْبَاطِلِ وَتَكْتُمَّوا الْحَقَّ وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ

“And cover not Truth With falsehood, nor conceal The Truth when ye know (what it is)”
A humble one, he/she learns to curtail his/her arrogance precisely because haughtiness is condemned: Allah does not love the high-handed person (Qur’an, 16:23, 31:18)

لا جَرَمَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يُعَلِّمُ مَا يُسِرُّونَ وَمَا يُعَلِّثُونَ إِنَّهُ لا يُحِبَّ الْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ

“Undoubtedly Allah doth know What they conceal. And what they reveal. Verily He loveth not the arrogant.”
“And swell not thy cheek (For pride) at men. Nor walk in insolence Through the earth: For Allah loveth not Any arrogant boaster.” (Quran 31:18-19)
The Qur’an praises those who do good and humble themselves (Qur’an 11:23).

“But those who believe And work righteousness, And humble themselves Before their Lord They will be Companions Of the Garden, to dwell Therein for aye!”
• The healthcare practitioner will not lie to his/her patient and abuse his/her power (Qur’an, 4:108), nor will he/she waste any resources hastily and unnecessarily (Qur’an, 7:31) and will not be tempted to forge any medical records (Qur’an, 39:33).

“They seek to hide themselves From the people But they cannot hide From Allah, while He is with them When they plot by night, In words that He cannot Approve: And Allah Doth compass round All that they do.”

“O Children of Adam! Wear your beautiful apparel At every time and place Of prayer: eat and drink: But waste not by excess, For Allah loveth not the wasters.”

“And he who brings the Truth And he who confirms (And supports) it- such are The men who do right.”
In addition, the physician is not supposed to make fun of his/her patients or call them names (Qur’an, 49:11)

“O ye who believe! Let not some men Among you laugh at others: It may be that The (latter) are better Than the (former)”
أكمل المؤمنين إيمانًا أحسنهم خلقًا

*hadith* reported by Imam Al Tirmidhi
Words..

- The English term “ethics” versus the Arabic word “Adab/Akhlaq”

“And you stand on a exalted standard of character” (Al Kalam:4)
اخلاق  

• Arabic term referring to the practice of virtue, morality and good manners in Islamic Theology and Philosophy (Falsafah).

• It is most commonly translated in English as disposition, good conduct, nature, temper, ethics, morals or character (of a person).
• Akhlaq is the plural for the word Khulq خلق which means disposition.
• "Disposition" is that faculty (Malakah ملكة) of the soul (Nafs نفس) which is the source of all those activities that a person performs spontaneously without thinking about them. Malakah is a property of the soul which comes into existence through exercise and repetitive practice and is not easily destroyed.

A particular disposition (Malakah) may appear in persons because of

- **Natural and physical make up (Fitrah):** Some people are patient while others not.

- **Habit (‘Ada):** It is formed because of continual repetition of certain acts and allows the emergence of a certain disposition (malakah and a second nature.

- **Practice and repetition:** Which if continued long enough will eventually lead to the formation of a disposition.

*Jami' al-Sa'adat*
Reason to chose and make decisions
ملكة العقل

• A person can reach perfection and wisdom through self-discipline and wise perseverance.

• The greater the amount of self-discipline and effort on the part of the individual, the higher the level of perfection that he/she would attain.

تفكروا يا أولي الالباب

Jami' al-Sa'adat
Avoid extremes in acts, thoughts and decisions

Mean using reason and heart

القلب العقل واقفاً

below the level of beasts

level of angels
These ideas are well known to most

- Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC)
- Nicomachean Ethics
  - Character, reason, appetite, habituation, virtues, golden mean, practical wisdom, etc.

- They are found in the Qur’an and the Sunnah.
Ring of Gyges- Plato’s Republic

• Glaucon tells the story of the Ring of Gyges

• According to the tradition, Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the king of Lydia; there was a great storm, and an earthquake made an opening in the earth at the place where he was feeding his flock. Amazed at the sight, he descended into the opening, and found a shepherded with a ring. When he turned the collet inwards he became invisible, when outwards he reappeared.

• Gyges did all sort of wrong things because he went unseen.
What is the morale of the story?

• A possessor of good Khuluq will do the right thing even when no one is looking.
An understanding of akhlaq incorporates both the virtuous agent and his/her act.

"I have been sent only for the purpose of perfecting good morals."
The Ethics of the Muslim Physician and the Legacy of Muhammad

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Conclusion

The Prophet ﷺ was asked “What is iḥsān (perfection)”? Allah’s Messenger ﷺ replied, “To worship Allah as if you see Him, and while you cannot see him you must know that He is looking at you.”

إن خياركم أحاسينكم أخلاقاً
The best among you are those who have the best manners and character.
Thus..

- The physician who abides by the Qur'an and the Sunnah will do the right thing *even when no one is looking*
"تركت فيكم ما إن تمسكتم بهما لن تضلوا بعدي أبدا كتاب الله وسنتي"
Final Note..

• All religions are different waters that go into the same sea..
• I am sure there are a lot of common points
Thank you!
References

• The Holy Qur’an