

# **Prophetic Medicine**

## ***‘A Holistic approach to Medicine’***

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### **Abstract:**

It is well known that certain Islamic Jurists and Scholars like Imam Bukari, Imam Muslim, and Imam Tirmizi, did exhaustive research to collect the sayings and traditions of our beloved Prophet PBUH. They then presented their collected works as 'Al Hadith' of the Prophet to the populace. Not only were these authenticated, as to their degree of authenticity, but each of the witnesses, or the chain of witnesses was scrutinized in depth, to ensure their veracity and truthfulness. Thereafter degrees were assigned to each saying or tradition depending upon outcome of this, in depth research. Thus each Hadith had to undergo this rigorous analysis before being accepted for inclusion in the works (Al Hadith) of these scholars.

Later Jurists like Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya and ad Dahabbi were able to collect the Hadith and Sunnah related to ***health hygiene, diseases and remedies*** into scholarly works for the general populace, who held great reverence and love for the Prophet and desired to know his opinions on every subject including these health and medical subjects. Never claiming to be a physician himself and many a times directing his ***ashabees*** (companions) to seek the help of a doctor, he none the less on many occasions gave advice on simple ailments, sicknesses and illnesses that he encountered during his life time. These were all faithfully recorded and collected and came to be termed as **“Prophetic Medicine”**.

In the realm of health, hygiene, prevention and treatment of maladies, the Prophet employed both popular remedies of his time as well as spiritual remedies. The latter comprised of recitation of verses of the Holy Quran, duas or prayers (nafl prayers) on various occasions, with successes recorded from his actions by various '*ashabees*' or 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 physicians, surgeons, orthopedists and ophthalmologists. By combining the two, and blending these philosophies together our Prophet can be considered one of the first ones to use a truly "holistic approach to the cure of disease". In this article we will examine in some detail these combined aspects of "Prophetic Medicine" which can truly be considered a 'Holistic" approach to Medicine.

### **Key Words:**

Prophetic Medicine

Holistic Medicine

Spiritual Medicine,

Islamic Medicine.

Prophet Mohammed.

Medicine of the Prophet.

'Prophetic Medicine' although popular amongst the Muslim masses because of its theological and doctrinal contents was considered by most Muslim historians and physicians as distinct from scientific and analytical Medicine which they termed as: "Islamic Medicine".

Is Prophetic Medicine same as Islamic Medicine? Some scholars tend to mix these two genres of Medicines 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 Khaldun (1332-1406 CE) a well known medieval Muslim jurist, historian, statesman in his '*Muqaddimah*'<sup>1</sup> Ibn Khaldun states:

*'The Bedouins in their culture, have a kind of medicine which they base primarily on experience restricted to a few patients only, and which they have inherited from their tribal leaders and old women. In some cases it is correct, but it is not founded on natural laws, nor is it tested against (scientific accounts) natural constitution (of peoples). Now the Bedouin Arabs had a great deal of this type of Medicine before the advent of Islam. There were among them well known doctors like al-Harith ibn Kalada and others. Their Medicine that has been transmitted in the Islamic religious works (as opposed to those works which were considered scientific works) belong to this genre. Prophetic Medicine is definitely no part of divine revelation (to the Prophet: Mohammed pbuh) but it was something customarily practiced by the Arabs. This type of Medicine thus is included in his biographies, and reproduced in his Ahadith and Sunna, just as are other multitudinous of matters of sociological importance like the natural life and customs of the Arabs, but forms no part of religion of Islam, nor does it need to be practiced in the same way.'*

The contemporaries (*Ashaabees*) of the Prophet of Islam had such reverence for him that each of his sayings or traditional practices (Hadith) and customs (Sunna) were recorded in the most detailed manner. See "Hadith" in Encyclopedia of Islam<sup>2</sup>. These collections although done after the Prophet's death inquired deep into the authenticity of the sayings and traditions and were chronicled under different subject headings. The most famous of the Hadiths are those of Bukhari, Muslim and Tirmidhi. The one by Imam Bukhari is most comprehensive. The sayings related to dietary recommendations and restrictions, general health and hygiene, first aid measures, treatment of minor ailments are grouped together in one chapter dealing with health matters. Some later Islamic jurists and scholars embarked on an in depth study of the Hadith and Sunnah of the Prophet dealing with health related matters in much greater depth and details and submitted elaborate commentaries on them. These collections were then made available to the Muslim populace as "**Prophetic Medicine**" or "**Tibb-e- Nabawi**". One of such collection is: "Zaad Al Maal" (Provisions for the

hereafter ) which was compiled by Mohammed Ibn Abi Bakr son of Ayyub and popularly known as “**Ibn Al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya**” (born 1292 CE, 691 AH died 1350 CE 753 AH). Several contemporary translation of the original work has been done. The one’s derived from authentic sources and manuscripts are: 1. Medicine of the Prophet translated by Penelope Johnson<sup>3</sup> 2. Another emendation of this work was recently published by Mohammed Al-Akili under the title of: “Natural healing with the Medicine of the Prophet”<sup>4</sup>. Our reader is directed to these works as additional sources of information on this subject.

Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya was a great Islamic scholar with in depth knowledge of Quranic commentaries, Islamic jurisprudence and the Sunnah and Traditions of the Prophet. Thus his collections bear some credence as regards their authenticity. However he was not only a theologian but also a practicing physician. He affirms however that the Prophet was guided by divine providence and hence his words if authenticated should be regarded with utmost respect. However they have to be taken in the context: in that these sayings and traditions are not divine injunctions or proscriptions, but are meant to guide the followers with a common sense approach to health and disease problems. And many of these suggestions and approaches have been found on detailed analysis to be not only of practical but may have a scientific bearing as well. Whenever we can we will endeavor to illustrate these points by giving examples in our discussions below.

While discussing the relationship between Prophetic medicine and scientific medicine Ibn Qayyim argues that the Prophetic medicine deals with the overall principles while the scientific medicine fills in the details. According to Penelope Johnson this assertion is for the reason that Ibn Qayyim’s concept of the nature of Man is twofold: 1)that of a body and 2)that of a spirit. For the same reason Ibn Qayyim argues:

*“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."*

Dr Fazlur Rahman writes thus in his chapter on Prophetic Medicine:<sup>5</sup>  
*"The integrality of the health of the whole person: spiritual, psychological, physical and moral- is the essence of the message of Prophetic Medicine."*

The Prophet indicated that there are two types of knowledge: 1.Knowledge of religion and 2.Knowledge of the body. He assigned equal importance to them both making the study of body equal in importance to study of the spirit or soul.

Some of the important narrations of the God's Messenger related to sickness are related in Sahih Muslim<sup>6</sup>: from the hadith of Abu al Zubayr and from Jabir bin Abd-allah it relates as follows: *"for every sickness that Allah created, He also created a remedy, and when the remedy to the disease is found the patient is cured by permission of Allah SWT."* 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.

Then there is the Hadith of Ziyad bin Alaqa from Usama bn Sharik: "I was with Prophet PBUH when some Bedouins came to him 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, all except one.' 'And which one is that?' to which he replied 'Old age'"<sup>7</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 1/3<sup>rd</sup> food, 1/3<sup>rd</sup> water and 1/3<sup>rd</sup> empty. This would make perfect sense in modern day society where obesity is a running pandemic!

Broadly speaking the Prophetic medicine has been divided into “physical medicine” the treatment of the physical body, and “spiritual medicine” the treatment of the soul. Each of these being equally important to treat the body as a whole, essentially offering 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 Holy Quran to provide the “relief” from illness.

In the Musnad and Sunan from Abu Khuzama:<sup>8</sup> I asked the Messenger of Allah : ‘Do you consider incantations (recitation) to which we have recourse a suitable means of treatment? And are they useful in protection (against disease)? Do they turn back anything in Allah’s decree? He replied: ‘They are a part of Allah’s decree.’

Most books on Prophetic medicine are filled with prescriptions and advice. Some have mystical potions, talismans, incantations, recitations and rituals. They are all linked to a deep faith and strong belief. The intended audience is the common man, the little educated or the unlearned, and generally the poor and the ignorant populace. The greatest appeal is to those that have a deep faith and high reverence for Allah SWT and his beloved Prophet SAW. 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 Medicines have been authored not by learned and practicing doctors, but by theologians and religious leaders.

Imam Shafii (d 819 CE) founder of Shafii school of shariah said: “I do not know of any type of knowledge, after the knowledge of what is lawful and what is unlawful more noble for a Muslim to acquire than that of Medicine. But alas they have neglected it, yes they have neglected 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of human knowledge, and abandoned it to Jews and Christians !”<sup>9</sup> an important remark alluding to the fact that many of the early doctors and physicians during his period (the Ummayyad period) were Christians and not Muslims.

Conclusions:

Our Prophet (PBUH) in his daily life and acting under Divine guidance was able 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 valuable advice of keeping away from areas afflicted by epidemics or contagion (like the plague). In addition he used prayer, dua, incantations and the recitation of Quranic verses to invoke blessings on persons afflicted with illness or bitten by insects or scorpions and by all documented accounts was able to ameliorate or cure their affliction, thus pointing to the ‘holistic’ nature of medicine, an approach that only recently is gaining scientific recognition and acceptance.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn Khaldun: *Al-Muqaddimah*, Cairo 1867 p 412

<sup>2</sup> Encyclopedia of Islam, New edition E J Brill Leiden Vol III 1986 pp 23-28

<sup>3</sup> Johnston Penelope “Medicine of the Prophet”

<sup>4</sup> Al-Akili, Mohammed: *Medicine of the Prophet*, Pearl Publishing House 1993

<sup>5</sup> Fazlur Rahman: *Health and Medicine in the Islamic tradition*, The Crossroad Publishing Co. NY 1987

<sup>6</sup> Sahih Muslim Salam 69

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Hanbal ‘*Musnad*’ 1:377

<sup>8</sup> Tirmidhi ‘*Tibb*’ 21

<sup>9</sup> Al Dhahabi ; *Al Tibb al Nabawi* (Cairo) 1961 pp107-8