

## Prince of Physicians

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Everyone is familiar with Hippocrates, Plato and Aristotle. Their works and their achievements. Ask about the contribution of the greats of Medicine who followed many centuries later, in the Islamic era and many would simply profess their ignorance.

One of the most famous philosopher-scientist of medieval Islamic World was Abu Ali Al Hussain Ibn Abdullah Ibn Sina. Avicenna, Ibn Sina in Arabic, was born in 980 A.D. near Bukhara, Persia (now in Uzbekistan). By age 10, he had read and memorized the Holy Quran. His tutor Natili taught him elementary logic, and having soon surpassed his teacher, Avicenna took to studying Hellenistic authors on his own. By age 16, he turned to Medicine and became a known physician by age 20. His prodigious writing career began at age 21. Around 240 of the exant titles bearing his name have survived. He wrote on astronomy, mathematics, physics, Islamic theology and poetry. His notable books on Medicine are "The Book of Healing" and "*Kitab Al-Qanoon fi al Tibb*". Better known to the world as "The Canon of Medicine."

"*Al-Qanoon*" was started by Ibn Sina when he was in his thirties and at the height of his fame and prowess. It took him twenty years to complete, and it contains the most extensive knowledge of the day concerning the theory and practice of Medicine and allied subjects. Even the word '*Qanun*' in the title, meaning 'canon' or 'codes of law' put a stamp of authority on it. Significant parts of its five volumes are based on his own clinical studies of his patients, his discussions with other scholars and various experiments, including those on animals. It attained the distinction of being regarded a great work in his lifetime and was read and taught in the well-known medical schools of the East and the West, being the standard text book in Baghdad and Cordoba besides such places as Padua, Vienna, Louvain and Montpellier till eighteenth century.

Many famous works of medical writing were already in existence when the 'Canon of Medicine' appeared. Al-Razi's "The Comprehensive Book on Medicine" (*Kitab Al-Hawi fi Al-Tibb*) had been translated into Hebrew and Latin and was widely read by medical students and medical practitioners alike, as was his

book on smallpox and measles. About the time of Al-Razi's death, another distinguished Persian, Ali Ibn al-Abbas al Majusi (d. 994) was born. He practiced Medicine in Baghdad and served as physician to its ruler Adud al-Dawlah. His only treatise, 'The Complete Book of Medical Art' (*Kitabe Kamil Al-Sina ah Al-Tibbiyah*) is one of the most comprehensive and well-organised compendia in early medical literature.

There was thus a whole tradition of medical writing in existence when Ibn Sina's Canon of Medicine appeared. It cannot therefore claim to be entirely original in form or subject matter; but in more ways than one, it was the culmination of all that had been done before in this field. A large work by any standards, it is, in most parts extremely well written and organized. Each of the five books is sub-divided into different *Fanns*, then *Fasl* and then *Maqala*. Book One gives a general description of the human body, its constitution, parts, temperaments and faculties. Then follows a section about common diseases, their causes and complications. It is followed by a section on general hygiene and the 'inevitability of death' and finally a section about the treatment of diseases. Book Two deals with *Materia Medica*. Book Three describes diseases afflicting a certain part of the body. This consists of twenty-two *Fanns*. Book Four includes diseases that affect many parts or the whole body such as fevers and is composed of seven *Fanns*. Book Five, the last one is on pharmacology and lists many compound medications in the shape of a formulary. The U.S. National Library of Medicine, Bethesda is fortunate to have a carefully executed complete copy, probably made at the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, with illuminated headings opening each of the five books.

Sir William Osler, the great physician and teacher of Medicine of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century simply called it "The most famous medical text-book ever written." The authors of this editorial also saw it fit to publish their book on the life and times of Ibn Sina, quoting select passages from 'The Canon' along the way. A clinician would marvel at the section on examination of the pulse, its relevance and technique, which has hardly been bettered a millennium down

the line. A pathologist would be no less impressed with the section on urine. And if it should seem to the reader that our civilization and knowledge are far more advanced, the difference between the present age and his is mainly of mechanical developments and phraseology. Though his opportunities were far less, a lot of what he wrote and observed still holds true. For many centuries after his demise, no star shone brighter in the medical world than this uniquely gifted man's. The one they called "Prince of Physicians."

## **Bibliography**

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