

The Ethics of the Muslim Physician and the Legacy of Muhammad ﷺ

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Abstract

Contemporary physicians have become entrepreneurs, and the patient is often seen as a client and medicine a commodity. As such, many patients as well as members of the health-care team feel that medicine is not living up to its own standards. It is the contention of the author that the Muslim physician, guided by the two primary sources of Islamic Law, the Qur'an and the *Sunna*, will possess the necessary character traits of a good physician. In this article I argue that the Muslim physician who abides by the *Sunna* will develop the character traits that will help him or her obtain the virtues necessary to be a good physician who will do the right thing even when no one is looking.

Key words: Medical ethics, Islam, *Sunna*, physician-patient relationship.

Introduction

In the Qur'an, God ﷻ addresses His Prophet ﷺ saying:

وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ

And you (stand) on an exalted standard of character.¹

In Surat Āl `Imran we read that God ﷻ has given his Prophet ﷺ the power and wisdom to teach humankind:

لَقَدْ مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذْ بَعَثَ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

Certainly Allah conferred a benefit upon the believers when He raised among them a Messenger from among themselves, reciting to them His signs and purifying them, and teaching them the Book and the wisdom, as they were before that surely in manifest error.²

It is my contention that should the Muslim physician follow the commands of the two primary sources of Islamic law, the Qur'an and the *Sunna*, he or she will embody the traits of the virtuous physician who will strive to treat his or her patients in the appropriate manner. Such a physician is much needed to salvage modern medical practice from the current downfall towards materialism and loss of humanism. The ethics of the Muslim physician based on the dictates of the Qur'an were previously published in this journal.³ Therefore, the focus of this article will be limited to the potential accomplishments if physicians were to follow the dictates of the *Sunna*.

The Qur'an stressed the exemplary conduct of the Prophet ﷺ and advised Muslims to emulate and obey his commands:

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قَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ لِّمَن كَانَ يَرْجُو
اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the praise of Allah.⁴

قُلْ إِن كُنتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ
ذُنُوبَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ

Say, If you do love Allāh, follow me: Allāh will love you forgive you your sins: For Allāh is Oft-Forgiving Most Merciful.⁵

God has given His Prophet ﷺ wisdom and taught him what no one else knows:

وَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَعَلَّمَكَ مَا لَمْ تَكُنْ
تَعْلَمُ وَكَانَ فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكَ عَظِيمًا

Allah has sent down to you the scripture and wisdom, and He has taught you what you never knew. Indeed, Allah's blessings upon you have been great.⁶

Generally speaking, the *Sunna* designates the way the Prophet ﷺ lived his life, and Muslims learn about it from narrations called *aḥādīth* (singular *ḥadīth*). More specifically, the principles of Islamic jurisprudence hold that *Sunna* consists of statements (*qawl*), actions (*fi'l*) and tacit permissions (*taqrīr*). The *ahadith* cited in this article are from the collection of al-Bukhārī, which is considered to contain the most authentic *aḥādīth*.

The Prophet ﷺ left teachings and led by example on matters related to kindness, cleanliness, generosity, charity, care of the sick, helping the poor, and other matters central to the life of individuals in society. It is the contention of this article that a person who follows the legacy of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ as portrayed in the *ahadith*, cannot fail but be virtuous in this world and be rewarded in the afterlife.

Character of the Muslim and the *Sunna* of the Prophet ﷺ

One wonders how an individual can discover the means distinguishing good from evil. Deontology

and utilitarianism are the prominent moral theories that offer such guidelines. Virtue ethics is an alternative moral theory that is distinguished from other theories by emphasizing the cultivation and embodiment of a moral character.

The moral character of a person mainly refers to the ensemble of qualities that distinguishes one person from another. Aristotle believed in the importance of character in the shaping of a person's life and in particular its role in establishing a flourishing life for an individual. He believed that to discern good from evil one has to develop character instead of following specific rules as in deontology. A person's character becomes his or her second nature.

Within the framework of virtue ethics, it is important for Muslim physicians to develop a virtuous character that becomes second nature and is inspired by the *Sunna* of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who used to say:

إِنْ خِيَارَكُمْ أَحَاسِنُكُمْ أَخْلَاقًا

The best among you are those who have the best manners and character.⁷

Therefore, possessing good *khuluq* (manners) characterizes a good believer. One then can question whether a physician can be a good Muslim but not a virtuous physician. That situation would be a moral impossibility for it will entail what I will call a "moral schizophrenia." Logically, an individual is either virtuous or not.

So what can the *Sunna* teach the Muslim physician in terms of virtues and character formation? The general provision of possessing good *khuluq* would encompass the development of a character that embodies tolerance, patience, honesty, kindness, and mercy while avoiding arrogance, pride, and anger. The remainder of the article will expound on how the qualities described in the *Sunna* can be implemented in the practice of medicine.

To emulate the Prophet ﷺ, a physician should be tolerant and patient with his or her colleagues, students, and patients. At age 10, Anas became the Messenger's servant ﷺ, and he remained in that capacity until the Messenger's death ﷺ. He reported:

خدمت النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم عشر سنين فما قال لي
أف ولا لم صنعت ولا ألا صنعت

I served the Prophet ﷺ for ten years, and he never said to me, “Uff.” [an onomatopoeia denoting impatience], and never blamed me by saying, “Why did you do so or why did you not do so?”⁸

Patients and students of medicine frequently complain about attending physicians who do not want to spend more than minimal time with them and lack patience in answering their worries or queries.

The physician should always be honest, benefit his or her patients, and speak kind words to others. The Messenger ﷺ said:

من لم يدع قول الزور والعمل به والجهل فليس لله حاجة
أن يدع طعامه وشرابه

[w]hoever does not give up false statements (i.e. telling lies), and evil deeds, and speaking bad words to others, Allah is not in need of his (fasting) leaving his food and drink.⁹

Truthfulness and candor are primary characteristics of the good Muslim, and so it should be a distinguishing quality of a good physician:

تجد من شرار الناس يوم القيامة عند الله ذا الوجهين، الذي
يأتي هؤلاء بوجه وهؤلاء بوجه

The worst people in the sight of Allah on the Day of Resurrection will be the double faced people who appear to some people with one face and to other people with another face.¹⁰

We often hear complaints about physicians who treat rich patients kindly but are impatient and arrogant with poor patients who cannot pay their bills.

The corrupt doctor is like a pretender who tells lies, does not keep his or her promises, and when patients entrust him or her with their lives' details, trust is betrayed with breaches privacy and confidentiality. These characters plague modern-day medicine and were decried by the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who said:

آية المنافق ثلاث إذا حدث كذب وإذا وعد أخلف وإذا
أؤتمن خان

The signs of a hypocrite are three: Whenever he speaks, he tells a lie; and whenever he promises, he breaks his promise; and whenever he is entrusted, he betrays (proves to be dishonest).¹¹

Most importantly, the *Sunna* warns against arrogance and pride, two major transgressions that have marked modern medicine. The Prophet ﷺ said:

لا ينظر الله يوم القيامة إلى من جر إزاره بطراً

Allah will not look, on the Day of Resurrection, at a person who drags his *izār* (garment) [behind him] out of pride and arrogance.¹²

Many studies have revealed public dismay at the attitudes of physicians who often act with superiority towards their colleagues and patients. A primary complaint commonly found within these studies is that physicians are often arrogant and prideful.¹³⁻⁴

Following the simple dictates of the *Sunna* can place the physician on a path of honesty, truthfulness, humility, and patience. Yet, modern medicine suffers from other lapses as well. Physician and philosopher Howard Brody cautions against treating patients as chunks of meat transported from one part of the hospital to another.¹⁵ Patients are human beings with a past, a present, and a future. They carry the weight of their illness, damaged autonomy, and injured dignity with them. The relationship between the physician and the patient can become compromised when a power imbalance exists. The physician must behave in a way that does not abuse the societal advantage given to him or her directly or indirectly. As such, the physician should ensure that he or she does not become angry with patients, who, because of their worry and lack of medical information, often find themselves having recurrent questions. Anger is not a sign of power and strength, and compassion and care should characterize the good physician instead. The Prophet ﷺ said:

ليس الشديد بالصرعة إنما الشديد الذي يملك نفسه عند
الغضب

The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his strength, but the strong is the one who controls himself while in anger.¹⁶

Yet, it is only fair to admit that often physicians find themselves prey to the rapid pace of contemporary medicine. With the advancement of diagnostic medical technology, many modern physicians refer their patients for X-ray or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) examinations without even doing a physical examination, thus failing to treat the patient as a human and instead treating the patient as a number or a disease to be dealt with as rapidly as possible. Particularly with health systems facing financial problems, physicians often see their patients as customers, and medicine is turning into a market place. The forgotten ingredient in health care seems to be mercy. The Prophet ﷺ succinctly summarized a governing principle for relationships:

من لا يرحم لا يرحم

Whoever is not merciful to others will not be treated mercifully.¹⁷

Many medical codes of ethics request that physicians waive their fees for poor patients. However, in reality, waivers are often instead granted to rich and powerful patients who could provide physicians with societal benefits. Consequently, the duty to help the poor is ignored by such physicians, who are also opposing the life and dictates of the Prophet ﷺ that are rich with incidents and sayings that emphasize the importance of helping the poor. The Prophet ﷺ said:

أطعموا الجائع وعودوا المريض وفكوا العاني

Feed the hungry, visit the sick and set free the captives.¹⁸

Conclusion

The Prophet ﷺ was asked “What is *ihsān* (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.”¹⁹ Thus, a Muslim physician who abides by the *Sunna* will eventually be the physician who will do right regardless of rules and regulations and whether or not someone will be judging. Once a moral, virtuous character is developed within a physician, he or she will act most appropriately even when no one is looking.

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