

Physicians' Attributes as Described by the Ancestor Scholars

Faisal A. Alnaser, MBBS, FPC, MICGP, FRCGP, FFPH, FAM (USA), PhD.

President-Elect WONCA Emr (World Congress for Family Physicians)

President, Bahrain Family Physician Association

Vice President; Gulf Family Physicians' Society

Honorary Faculty; Dept of Primary Care & Public Health, Imperial College, London

Vice President, International Society for the History of Islamic Medicine (ISHIM)

WHO EMRO Temp Adviser.

Bahrain Representative in Anti-Smoking International Alliances

Correspondance: faisal.alnaser@gmail.com

Summary:

Modern scientific and medical literature is rich, describing the qualities required for a good practicing doctor. Moreover, ancient literature, historians, and manuscripts of early Muslim doctors are also rich in describing the traits of physicians that they should embody to be sincere in performing their work. From the Hippocrates and Galen era to Al-Razi, Ibn Sina, Al-Rahawi, and others, much emphasis was put on these values, from the ancient Greek to Muslim physicians.

Introduction:

Abu Bakr Muhammad bin Yahya bin Zakariya Al-Razi (250 AH/864 CE - 311 AH/923 CE) said: "*Medicine is the preservation of the health of the healthy and restoring it to the sick as much as human capability allows.*" (1-3)

The inspired physician Avicenna (Sheikh al-Rais Abu Ali, Hussein bin Abdullah Ibn Sina, who passed away in 428 AH), in his famous verse, defines medicine as "*the preservation of the health of someone who is ill, through a cause in the body that led to a symptom.*"



Al-Razi
(864 CE - 923 CE)



Al-Razi Book in Medicine

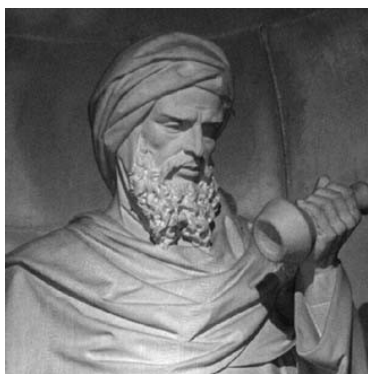


*Ibn Sina
(980—1037)*



AlcanonIn Medicine for Avicenna

However, Ibn Rushd (Muhammad bin Ahmad bin Muhammad Ibn Rushd Al-Andalusi), also known as Abu Walid (520-595 AH = 1126-1198 CE) had a different perspective. He said: "*The craft of medicine is a practical profession based on truthful principles, aimed at preserving the health of the human body and abolishing illness.*" (4)



*Ibn Alrushd
(1126-1198)*

Hence, Medicine is a unique and pioneering profession, because it deals directly with the human body, soul, and emotions without any intermediary. Moreover, medicine is also the only profession with power and control over another person, where the patient voluntarily submits to the doctor's full authority without coercion. It is the

profession with the most profound and direct impact on the life, well-being, or even the demise of a person, or their exposure to epidemics and diseases. For that doctors need to be distinguished by multiple and unique qualities, as patients are completely vulnerable, exposing all their personal sensations and physical barriers to the doctor, who uncovers their innermost self without reservation.

In this regard, Ishaq bin Ali Al-Rahawi in his book "The Ethics of the Physician" in the 4th century AH stated: "*The profession of medicine is the noblest of professions, and its science is the oldest of sciences. It must be ranked above all other professions and crafts...*" (5,6).



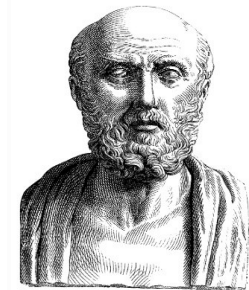
*Ishaq bin Ali Al-Rahawi
(854-931)*



The Ethics of the Physician

Mahmoud bin Saud bin Muslih Al-Farsi (710 AH) also emphasized the uniqueness of the medical profession, describing it as a divine gift of great honor: "*The science of medicine is the noblest of sciences after divine knowledge, for its subject is the human body....*" It is a difficult and almost impossible profession, reserved only for those who are blessed with it. Not everyone who desires it can attain it. According to both ancient and modern scholars, it is a gift from the blessings of God. It is a science among the divine sciences or one that is very

close to them. Hippocrates, known as the father of medicine (born on the island of Kos around 460 BCE), said, "No human mind can fully grasp this science." (7)



Hippocrates
(c. 460 BC – c. 370 BC)

The physician, as mentioned in ancient texts, must be wise in all meanings of wisdom, possessing multiple talents and diverse intellects, constantly distinguished, balanced in their approach, logical, knowledgeable about the sciences of humanity, in addition to being gifted with bright traits alongside their medical skills. Al-Rahawi mentioned in this regard: "Every philosopher is a physician, and every virtuous physician is a philosopher. A philosopher cannot reform anything but the soul, while a virtuous physician can reform both the soul and the body." (6)

The General Knowledge of the Physician:

Physicians must not limit themselves to just the medical sciences but are expected to broaden their knowledge and understanding in various theoretical and scientific fields and be fully familiar with the history of medicine, its origins, and the great scholars who contributed to its advancement. Additionally, they must possess specialized knowledge.

Therefore, a physician's knowledge should include the following:

1. Theoretical Sciences:

This knowledge comes from reviewing research, books, writings, and records of the results of studies implemented by past and present scholars in the fields of medicine. For example, they must be familiar with the legacy of ancient doctors like Ibn Sina, Al-Razi, Hippocrates, Galen, and others who shared their opinions. They must also strive to understand and uncover the complexity of modern scientific research. As Sa'id bin Al-Hassan (the physician Abu Alaa Sa'id bin Al-Hassan bin Sa'id, 464 AH) stated: "The physician

must be diligent in studying, reading, and reviewing the sciences of the ancients..." (8). Thus, a physician cannot remain stagnant, content with what they have already acquired in basic sciences but must engage in continuous learning to keep up with new discoveries and medical theories based on the knowledge of the past and the efforts of modern scholars.

2. Practical Sciences:

Physicians acquire practical knowledge through attending conferences, and training courses during their service, as well as paying attention to patient follow-ups and continuously being present in hospital departments. They should also be familiar with medical laws and regulations. It is essential to acknowledge that the physician's expertise and experience in practicing medicine increase as they continue consulting and treating patients and accept the notion that they are constantly training and learning.

3. Specialized Knowledge:

Physicians acquire specialized knowledge by associating with experienced professors and veteran doctors. Through interactions with them, they benefit from their distilled experiences, which help them absorb more medical knowledge. They also gain from participating in their discussions, interventions, and methods for treating complex cases. All of this is facilitated through regular and daily meetings with their mentors and colleagues at all levels, whether in personal meetings, workshops, or specialized conferences. The Arab physician Ibn Ridwan (Abu Al-Hassan Ali bin Ridwan bin Ali bin Ja'far, who grew up in Egypt in the 5th century AH and died in 460 AH) said in the first chapter of his book *The Approach to Happiness*: "Either the learner finds an excellent teacher who can explain the teachings of Hippocrates, thus accelerating his education as rapidly as Galen's, or he is deprived of such a teacher and needs to learn from Galen's books, which prolongs the time of learning if he applies the principles of logic in his education." (9-10)

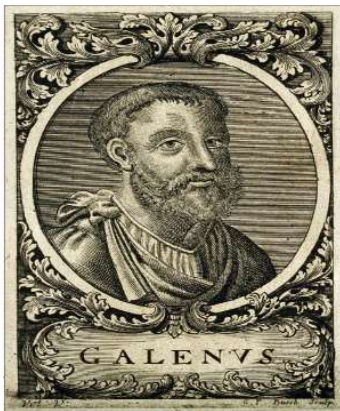


Ibn Ridwan (c. 988 - c. 1061)

Physicians' attributes:

In addition to the previously mentioned characteristics of the medical profession, a physician must possess a variety of personal qualities. These include, for example, being of good character and integrity, not being spiteful or envious, not hasty or impatient, and not greedy. The qualities of a successful physician, as mentioned by Al-Rahawi, include *"being forgiving of faults, patient with people, steadfast and calm, knowledgeable in their work, gentle, humble, quick to do good deeds, content and grateful, delighted with sincere praise, abstaining from vice, and pure in both heart and actions."* (5)

Galen (a famous Greek physician and writer, born to Greek parents in the ancient city of Pergamum, now known as Bergama in Turkey, in 130 CE, and died in 200 CE) described the ideal physician, noting the difference between a physician and someone who merely practices medicine: *"A physician is the one who possesses all virtues—knowledge of teaching, natural sciences, divine matters, logic, medicine, good deeds, and excellent character."* (11)



Galen
(130 CE- 200 CE)

Sa'id bin Al-Hassan (8) described the traits of a physician, stating: *"The physician must have a balanced temperament, be pure in heart, committed to their religion, and follow the law. They should be intelligent, quick-witted, and insightful, known for their honesty, integrity, and care for the welfare of others. They should be moderate in their desires, not greedy for wealth or envious of others, well-mannered, well-educated, focused on their studies and always reading, compassionate with the weak and the poor, eager to treat them before the rich, practicing chastity, and discreet in keeping secrets. They should avoid excessive joking or error, not be swayed by the temptation of alcohol, and should not*

indulge in vice or immorality." He also stated: *"A physician must be calm, clear-headed, quick to act with a strong mind, and trustworthy with the lives and wealth of others. They must not prescribe harmful or fatal medicine or anything that could harm an unborn child. They should treat everyone, regardless of their status, with the same dedication, as they would treat their loved ones."*



Sa'id bin Al-Hassan

A physician must also be mindful of God when dealing with patients, and the values of religion should guide their character and actions, regardless of their personal beliefs. Divine teachings, in general, encourage good treatment of others, including patients, and all people in general, as well as all creatures.

Ibn Ridwan believed that a virtuous physician should possess several qualities, which he outlined as follows, based on Hippocrates' opinion: (12)

First: The physician must have a perfect physique, be mentally sharp, have good eyesight, and possess rational thinking and good temperament.

Second: The physician should be well-dressed, have a pleasant scent, and maintain cleanliness in both body and clothing.

Third: The physician must keep the secrets of their patients and not divulge any details about their illnesses.

Fourth: The physician's desire to heal patients should surpass their desire for financial gain. They should prioritize treating the poor over the rich.

Fifth: The physician should be eager to learn and focus on benefiting others.

Sixth: The physician should have a pure heart, be modest, truthful in speech, and not have any immoral thoughts or desires related to wealth or women.

Seventh: The physician must be trustworthy, responsible for the well-being of others, and not prescribe harmful treatments or medications. They should approach their patients with a sincere heart, whether they are enemies or loved ones.

In this regard, the **American College of Physicians** issued a document in 2002 titled *The Medical Profession Charter*, which comprehensively outlines the foundational principles of a physician's interaction with patients. It establishes three main principles and ten essential responsibilities: (13, 14)

The Key Principles are:

1. **Priority to Patient's Welfare:** This principle emphasizes the physician's commitment to serving the patient's best interests without external influences.
2. **Patient Autonomy:** This refers to the physician's honesty with the patient and their commitment to encouraging patients to actively participate in decisions about their treatment.
3. **Social Justice:** This principle ensures equitable access to healthcare, which is considered a right for every individual. It calls on physicians to eliminate any form of discrimination based on race, gender, or any other basis that may prevent a patient from receiving medical care.

While the Primary Responsibilities of the Physician are:

This responsibility emphasizes that a physician must maintain a high standard of medical skill and continuously improve their qualifications throughout their career. Continuous learning is crucial to ensure competence and ability to meet evolving medical challenges. Hence physicians should ensure having:

1. **Appropriate Qualification:**

It is the physician's responsibility to be at the required level and have a good reputation for medical skills, which requires continuous learning and teaching throughout his or her life.

2. **Commitment to Honesty with Patients:**

A physician must be truthful and transparent with their patients, especially when errors occur. If a medical mistake happens, the physician must inform the patients honestly and ensure them to investigate, and mitigate any possible causes or risks that may lead to further harm.

3. **Adherence to Confidentiality:**

The physician is responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of patient information. This includes not disclosing or discussing patient details without the patient's explicit consent, as protecting privacy is a cornerstone of medical ethics.

4. **Maintaining Professional and Humane Relationships with Patients:**

The physician should build and maintain a respectful and professional relationship with patients. This relationship should not foster dependency on the physician nor be influenced by ulterior motives such as financial or sexual interests.

5. **Commitment to Improving the Quality of Care:**

A physician is responsible for continuously striving to provide the best possible medical care. This means collaborating with relevant institutions and pursuing ongoing improvements in the delivery of care and treatment standards.

6. **Commitment to Improving Accessibility to Health Services:**

Physicians must work toward facilitating access to health services for all patients, particularly in public health and preventive care, ensuring that healthcare is available and accessible without delay or hindrance.

7. **Commitment to Fair Distribution of Healthcare Resources:**

It is the physician's responsibility to ensure that healthcare resources are distributed equitably. This includes the appropriate procurement of medical equipment and resources required for the healthcare provision.

8. Commitment to Neutrality in Conflicts of Interest:

A physician should always prioritize the patient's well-being above other interests, especially when there are potential conflicts with the interests of pharmaceutical companies, medical device manufacturers, or other entities providing healthcare support.

9. Commitment to Professional Responsibility:

Physicians must respect the opinions of their colleagues and seek input, when necessary, whether from local or international experts. This helps strengthen professional relationships and enhances their skills through collaboration and feedback.

10. Commitment to Keeping Up with Scientific and Technological Advances:

Physicians must continuously update their knowledge and practices in line with scientific developments and the latest technologies. This ensures that they are equipped to meet the patients' needs effectively, utilizing the most advanced tools and methodologies available in healthcare.

Physician's Negligence and Mistakes:

The medical profession does not tolerate negligence or error, as these can lead to severe consequences, such as worsening the patient's condition or even causing death or permanent disability.

Moreover, it results in a significant loss of reputation for the physician and potential legal and moral consequences. Galen, in his differentiation between a true physician and a mere practitioner, stated: *"A true physician is the one who has perfected all the virtues and acquired extensive knowledge in medicine, philosophy, natural science, and ethics. If anyone lacks any of these characteristics, they are not truly a physician but merely a practitioner."* He also stressed that someone who claims to be a physician without adequate training is a fraud and unworthy of respect in the medical field. Some of these individuals, who claim expertise in medicine while lacking essential knowledge, may seek to assume leadership roles, which can be harmful to both patients and the profession. They are ignorant and dangerously uninformed, often unable to distinguish right from wrong, and their presence in the field can cause lasting damage to public trust.

Choosing and Testing a Physician:

In general, when seeking medical advice or consultation, the selection of a physician should be based on a comprehensive assessment of their qualifications, knowledge, and ethical standards. The primary means of testing a physician's competence is through inquiries into their professional history to confirm the depth of their medical knowledge and their adherence to the principles of the profession. As noted by Al-Shirazi, *"If a physician is modest, religious, and upright, then consider them for your care."* The physician's reputation, success in treating illnesses, and ethical standing play significant roles in their selection. Books, research publications, and scientific endeavors also help identify the best candidates for medical care, as these achievements reflect the physician's knowledge, dedication, and competence. Furthermore, Al-Shirazi pointed out that a physician's intellect is not only reflected in their knowledge but also in their ethical demeanor, self-restraint, and avoidance of indulgence in worldly desires. *"A physician's true intellect begins not with the breadth of their knowledge, but with their ethical character and their ability to resist temptation."*

Sa'id bin Al-Hassan set forth additional criteria, stating that; *"A physician should not approach patients until they are called upon. This shows respect for their status and prevents the physician from becoming overly familiar or too eager to impose themselves on patients, which could diminish their authority."* He advised against excessive familiarity and stressed maintaining a balance in professional conduct. On the other hand, Al-Rahawi believed that testing a physician's knowledge is essential. He added that; *"it is equally important to observe a physician's actions, both in personal conduct and in their interaction with others, as this provides a clear indication of their competence and understanding."*

Thus, the selection of physicians should be based not only on theoretical knowledge but also on their moral behavior, professional reputation, and consistent display of expertise in their field.

Benefits of the Medical Profession and Medical Sciences:

The field of medicine offers profound reflections on the greatness of God's creation. The intricate components of the human body—whether fluids, cells, organs, or systems—all work tirelessly since birth or even before without rest, except in the case of death. Some organs, like the heart, begin functioning from the moment of

conception, while others start after birth or even later in life. All of these are signs and miracles that testify to the greatness, power, and oneness of the Creator. Physicians, as the first observer and contemplator of this magnificent creation, are uniquely positioned to witness the marvels of God's work and to dedicate their efforts to the preservation of human health. This fosters a deep sense of belief and motivation to pursue further education and care for humanity.

It is truly astonishing that a practicing physician, who witnesses the miracles of God's creation firsthand, does not increase in faith. If a physician does not find their faith in God strengthened through these experiences, they are, without a doubt, ignorant and far from true understanding, thus deserving of great loss. Moreover, the physician and the science of medicine are blessed with divine favor—granting the physician the continued grace of mercy, forgiveness of sins, and the joy of maintaining physical health, mental peace, and spiritual contentment. All of this is a divine blessing that necessitates gratitude to God and a commitment to the profession for the benefit of humanity.

As Ibn Ridwan mentions in his book "Maqalat fi Sharaf al-Tibb" (Chapter 1), *"The benefits and virtues of this profession are immense; they pertain to the body, the soul, the attainment of Allah's grace, the acquisition of wealth, and the attainment of leadership and honor."*

In conclusion, we beseech Allah to protect us from the evil within ourselves and from those who are misguided. May He illuminate our hearts with the light of knowledge and guidance, and may He grant us clarity and insight to see the divine care surrounding us. We pray that we may be among the physicians who are steadfast in our faith, ever mindful of Allah in our treatment of patients.

References:

1. [1-https://ar.lib.efatwa.ir/45203/1/248](https://ar.lib.efatwa.ir/45203/1/248)

2. -الحاوي في الطب، أبو بكر الرّازي، الجزء الأول

الطب العربي / تأليف ادوارد .ج .براون ؛ ترجمة احمد شوقي حسن

3. Ullman, Manfred – Islamic Medicine – Islamic Survey – Edinburgh University, 1978, p. XIII
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44450546>
4. <https://iep.utm.edu/ibn-rushd-averroes>
5. https://archive.org/download/aalam_almaarifa/233.pdf
6. <https://www.islamstickers.uk/forum/attachments/medical-errors-pdf.16/>
7. <http://www.sjsu.edu/depts/Museum/hippoc.html>
8. <https://www.islamstory.com/ar/artical/3407740> (saad bin alhassan)
9. <http://www.ishim.net/anakaan6/alimasri.htm> (Dr Abdul Nasir Kaadan)
10. ابن أبي أصيبعة : عيون الانباء ، 565
11. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galen>
12. Leclerc, Lucien : Histoire de la médecine arabe, Burt, Franklin, New York, USA, 1978, tome 1, p.303
13. ABIM Foundation. American Board of Internal Medicine; ACP-ASIM Foundation. American College of Physicians-American Society of Internal Medicine; European Federation of Internal Medicine. Medical professionalism in the new millennium: a physician charter. Lancet. 2003; 136:243-6
14. Medical Professionalism Project. Medical Professionalism in the new millennium: a physicians' charter. Lancet. 2002; 359:520-2
15. Reuben Elder. Quality of Care. MedicinskaNaklada. CMJ Book Collection. Zagreb, 2005