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Hospitals Before Islam

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## Medicine Before Islam

To comprehend the contributions of Arabs to medicine, we must have in our minds a picture of the condition of medicine before they arrived at the scene. Generally speaking, two elements are required for medical practice:

### Manpower And Hospitals

#### A. Manpower Before Islam

There were medical centers in different parts of the world which were later either under control of the Arabs or in touch with them. For example, in Syria, medicine was advanced and was greatly influenced by the Byzantine civilization which affected also the economic and administrative systems (Hammameh 1962). From the fifth century on, the Greek was the language of learning in Syria. The knowledge of the Arabs of the Greek civilization was mainly through the Syrian scholars who translated it into Arabic.

In Egypt, Alexandria was another center for culture. The Arabs got in touch with both the ancient Egyptian and Greek civilizations through the Egyptian scholars. In Persia, there was a medical school in a city called Jundi-Shapur in which medicine was highly developed.

The Abbasi Caliphs during the 8th century encouraged the Persian physicians to translate into Arabic the medical knowledge therein, to build medical centers in Baghdad, the capital of their empire, and to run newly built hospitals. With further expansion east, the Arabs through contacts with India and China, brought ideas and methods, not only in medicine, but also in mathematics, chemistry, philosophy, etc.

#### B. Hospitals Before Islam

Hospitals as we know them now probably were not present. True, there were places for the sick to stay, but these were mainly temples or annexes to temples that were run by priests. Gods were supposed to play a major role in the art of healing. For example, the Goddess Taueris was the Egyptian symbol of fecundity and protectress of the pregnant and parturient.

She was shown as a standing pregnant hippopotamus carrying the hieroglyph meaning protection in one paw, and the sign of life in the other. Small figures of Toucris were popular as amulets (Speert 1973). In those days, sanctuary, prayers, inactation, and hypnosis were integral parts of the therapy.

Characteristic Features of Hospitals in the Islamic Civilization During the Islamic civilization, hospitals had much developed and attained specific characteristics:

1. Secular: Hospitals served all peoples irrespective of color, religion, or background. They were run by the government rather than by the church, and their Directors were commonly physicians assisted by persons who had no religious color. In hospitals, physicians of all faiths worked together with one aim in common: the well-being of patients.
2. Separate wards: Patients of different sexes occupied separate wards. Also, different diseases especially infectious ones, were allocated different wards.
3. Separate nurses: Male nurses were to take care of male patients, and vice versa.
4. Baths and water supplies: Praying five times a day is an important pillar of Islam. Sick or healthy, it is an Islamic obligation; of course, physical performance depends on one's health, even he can pray while lying in bed. Before praying, washing of face, head, hands, and feet must be done, if possible. For certain conditions, a bath is obligatory. Therefore, these hospitals had to provide the patients and employees with plentiful water supply and with bathing facilities.
5. Practicing physicians: Only qualified physicians were allowed by law to practice medicine. In 931 A.D., the Caliph Al- Mugtadir from the Abbasid dynasty, ordered the Chief Court Physician Sinan Ibn-Thabit to screen the 860 physicians of Baghdad, and only those qualified were granted license to practice (Hamarneh 1962).

The counterpart of Ibn- Thabit, Abu-Osman Sai'd ibn Yaqub was ordered to do the same in Damascus, Mecca, and Medina. The latter two cities were in need for such an act because of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visiting them every year. This was to prevent taking advantage of these pilgrims and to curb the spread of diseases among them.

6. Rather medical schools: The hospital was not only a place for treating patients, but also for educating medical students, interchanging medical knowledge, and developing medicine as a whole. To the main hospitals, there were attached expensive libraries containing the most up-to-date books, auditoria for meetings and lectures, and housing for students and house staff.
7. Proper records of patients: For the first time in history, these hospitals kept records of patients and their medical care.
8. Pharmacy: During the Islamic era, the science and the profession of pharmacy had developed to an outstanding degree. The Arabic materia medica became so rich and new drugs and compounds were

introduced because the Muslims had contact with almost all the known world at that time, either through control or trade. Their ships sailed to China and the Philip- pines, and their convoys made trades with black Africa, Europe and Asia. Chemistry became an advanced science, and there were means and need for a specialization called pharmacy.

Thus, the main Arabian hospitals were models for medieval hospitals built later in Europe. They were rather medical schools to which those seeking advanced medical knowledge, from the East or West, attended.

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