An Introduction to Prophetic Medicine
with Shakyh Atabek

The topic being considered is Prophetic medicine but we will also be looking at Islamic herbal medicine during the course as a supplement to the Prophetic teachings.

ORIGINS

Did the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) have a specific type of Prophetic herbal medicine which differed from Greek or traditional Arab medicine?

Orientalists argue that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) used pre-Islamic Arabian medicine as his main source of knowledge. This idea is seemingly supported by a sound hadith in which the nephew of Aisha [the wife of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him)] asked her how she had gained such knowledge of herbal medicine without ever going out and studying it. She replied that many Bedouin from a range of different tribes visited Medina and she learnt her knowledge from them.

However, there are many examples of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) contradicting traditional Arabic medicine. For example, Arabs would traditionally treat glandular/throat infections in children by squeezing the windpipe with their fingers in the hope of providing some type of relief. When he saw this, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) asked “Why are you killing your children?” He instead proscribed a different remedy based on using bukhoor mixed with oil.

A person may also ask: Do you think the Prophet Muhammad (saw) came to teach us biology, astronomy and that kind of knowledge? Isn’t the duty of the Prophet to tell his people how to recognise the difference between truth is and falsehood? Why did he (peace and blessings be upon him) teach us medicine?

We would argue that it is the duty of the Prophets to guide us to all worldly and otherworldly knowledge and that they are in fact the source of ALL types of beneficial knowledge.

The truth of this statement in relation to medicine can be demonstrated by the following example. There are millions of herbs which can be extracted from different plants and thousands of diseases which they are required to treat. We must then ask
ourselves how long it would take to arrive at the right combination to treat any particular disease through experimentation alone? So if, for example, there were 300 million herbs and 10,000 known diseases then the probability of arriving at the right combination to treat even one single disease through a scientific approach is very high. This knowledge cannot be arrived at other than through prophecy. Thus the denial of Prophets as a source of medicinal knowledge means acceptance that human life must be trillions, not billions, of years old. This is certainly not in line with the belief held by many current scientists who state that the Earth is around 4 billion years old.

The Quran tells us “There isn’t any village except there was a Prophet sent to it”. In other words the Prophetic message is universal so all cultures have been influenced by this including the Greeks, Chinese, Indians etc. It’s interesting to note that the Greek Philosophers like Galen, Aristotle etc got their knowledge from one of the disciples of the Prophet Dawud (peace be upon him) so there is a prophetic link here. In fact one could argue that these Greek thinkers were like Imam Abu Hanifa and other great scholars in that they used the general principles laid down by the Prophets to extract detailed cures to different diseases.

A Hadith related by Ibn Abbas which can be found in Tabarani tells us that once Suleiman (peace be upon him) was engaged in prayer when suddenly a tree began to speak to him saying “I am such and such a tree and I am a cure of so and so”. Suleiman ordered his slave to bring a pen and paper and began to write down this information.

**History and Development of Prophetic Medicine**

It’s very important to recognise that the medicine taught by the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) is in its own category and very different from Greek, Chinese, Arab or any other type of traditional medicine.

The sources of this knowledge are:- a) The Quran b) Hadith c) Specific books written by scholars. This knowledge was never really codified like fiqh with great scholars such as Imam Abu Hanifa and Imam Shafi using the Quran and Sunnah to extract details and preserve them for our benefit. The closest example we have of this type of process is the medicine of the Ahl-ul Bayt [the family of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him)] with Imams like Ja’far al-Sadiq being at the forefront of this. However there are just over 2000 Hadith relating to this which mention the treatment of 50-100 diseases that can serve as a basis for bringing the science of Prophetic medicine into existence.

The first book on the topic that is still in existence today was written by Imam Ali Rida (AS) who died in 203 AH and hence lived in the early period of Islamic history. Other notable scholars who penned books on the topic include Al-Hafiz Abdul Malik ibn Habib from Andalusia (d. 238 AH), Al-Hafiz Ibn Sinni (365 AH), Imam Al-Dahabi, Imam Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751 AH) and Imam al Suyuti.
Imam al-Dhahabi’s work is considered particularly useful as he wrote it in the same order as the very well known Encyclopaedic Al-Qanun by Ibn Sina and hence is an excellent reference book which can be easily used. Imam al-Suyuti’s work is also highly recommended because he includes many texts from famous herbalists like Ibn Sina and Ibn Nafees to provide commentary on Hadith.

Models of medicine

There were two basic medicinal approaches outlined by the Shaykh. The first one was the homeopathic approach which relates to treating a disease with the actual cause of the disease (for example, if the disease was caused by heat then the homeopath will use more heat to treat it). Secondly, he mentioned the allopathic approach which is to treat a disease with its opposite (for example, to treat heat with cold). Greek and Islamic herbal medicine is allopathic in general as is contemporary medicine.

Contemporary medicine deals with diseases in one of two ways. The first way is based on the idea that the human body is strong enough to fight any disease but he is prevented from doing this due to fear so he is given something to overcome that fear. For example, a patient suffering from a throat infection is given painkillers and then the body is left to fight off the sickness by itself as opposed to a medicine that deals with the root cause of the illness.

The second way is to find the source of the disease and kill it. For example, a stomach infection caused by bacteria is treated by administering the patient with a tablet which destroys the bacteria (i.e. essentially an allopathic approach). It is important to note that Prophetic medicine is neither homeopathic or allopathic but rather is a mixture of the two and hence in a category of its own.

An example of an allopathic approach is the blessed Prophet’s (peace and blessings be upon him) instructions to Aisha to get a damp cloth when he was afflicted with a high fever towards the end of his life. A homeopathic approach has already been mentioned in relation to glandular fever (a disease caused by excessive heat) which the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) advised to treat by using more heat (i.e. bukhoor mixed with oil).
We will now consider one of the most common diseases of our time namely joint pain. Our focus will be on specific joint pains related to the lower part of the body (i.e. back down to feet) although the Prophetic remedy provides a treatment for all of types.

To understand how joint pain occurs, we need to have a basic understanding of human anatomy. There is a layer of tissue between any two bones which prevents the bones from coming together (i.e. cartilage) as well as nerves endings which are also lodged here. Joint pain thus occurs when the cartilage wears away resulting in nerve endings being damaged by the bones resulting in excruciating pain.

We are going to specifically consider back pain at the base of the spine which results in someone seizing up and being unable to move as the 3 bones found at the spinal base are rubbing against the nerve endings. Someone suffering from such a condition will end up in crutches with the pain then spreading downwards to ones knees, shins and feet. This can eventually lead to paralysis if left untreated.

Possible Remedies

Contemporary medical remedy to this condition is to administer a patient with painkillers for a period of time ranging from a few months up to around 2 years. The patient is then encouraged to get plenty of rest and sleep on a firm mattress which is able to hold the shape of the back. He is also given certain other medicines to take which it is hoped will aid in a full recovery. If this doesn’t work then the final resort is an operation to artificially widen the gap between the bones and hence release the trapped nerve.

The above treatment provides significant pain relief to approximately 90% of patients with the remaining 10% having operations. There are side affects to modern treatment, however, such as constant discomfort which can lead to psychological problems. There is also a chance of infection if the patient is operated upon due to the use of metals such as platinum to separate the bones from the nerves. It can thus be argued that this type of joint pain, which is now starting to occur in the knees due to sports like squash and basketball which involve sudden movements leading to knee cartilage becoming damaged, is in the same category as different types of cancer in that contemporary medicine has failed to provide a complete cure.

The traditional Arab treatment to this ailment was to heat up a rock or a brick, roll it up in a cloth and place it on the back of the patient. This treatment is largely ineffective with this type of tissue damage although it can prove to be very effective for back strain caused by sitting on uncomfortable surfaces for prolonged time periods. There are also other treatments mentioned by herbalists for treating this type of muscle tension such as the administration of almond oil alongside other ingredients such as ginger or honey on the body part where the pain is taking place.

Prophetic Remedy
The Prophetic remedy can be found in a sahih (rigorously authenticated) hadith found in Ibn Majah where Sayiduna Anas (may Allah be please with him) tell us that he heard the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) say that the treatment for this is to drink the fat found in the back of a wild/Bedouin sheep (i.e. a sheep not fed by synthetic food but rather one which eats completely natural foods found in the countryside). The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) explained that this fat is heated up and stirred until the fat becomes liquid. It is then separated into 3 equal parts and drunk on a daily basis. The effects of this are felt on the first day and after a week the pain completely disappears. Sayiduna Anas himself tried this treatment on 300 people and they were all completely cured. (N.B. This is clearly a paraphrase of the Hadith and certainly not a translation).

The type of sheep mentioned in this Hadith cannot be found in the UK where sheep tend to have a short tail rather than a large back but they are common in Italy, parts of France and Pakistan. Also, the Shaykh emphasised that the sheep must be fed natural, non-synthetic food for this cure to work as 90% of sheep in the world today aren’t fed this type of food. He also emphasised the fact that this treatment is very simple and straightforward and doesn’t need a lot of complicated jargon or difficult terminology to be explained or administered.

Islamic Herbal Medicine and animal fat

Islamic herbal medicine, which is heavily influence by the traditional Greek model, is built on the idea that diseases are caused by an imbalance of the four humours (hot, cold, wet and dry) in the human body. Thus it is essentially allopathic in nature in that a disease caused by too much cold, for example, is treated by a hot remedy. There are four different degrees of heat which are be used to create a balance depending on how cold a person’s constitution has become.

In the context of joint pain, it must be noted that the fat found in the back of a sheep is the 2nd degree of heat and hence is effective for people suffering from severe joint pain such as what has been discussed above. For those with less severe joint pain, sheep fat found in the rest of a sheep’s body (1st degree heat so not as warm as the fat found in the back) can be effective for pain relief. This is because, according to Ibn Nafees, our nerves are insulated by fat which prevents us from feeling pain. If our constitution is too cold, however, this fat can solidify and cause us discomfort. Eating this hot fat therefore converts this insulated layer back to liquid thus keeping our nerves well lubricated.

Other benefits of consuming this hot fat include more energy and general freshness alongside a stronger sex drive and increased virility for a man. Cold fat, by contrast, which can be found in cows for example makes one more lethargic and lazy and thus should be avoided particularly in cold climates. The Shaykh emphasised, however, that the key point is to maintain a balance thus if one has a hot temperament or constitution (symptoms of this include being hot tempered or easily irritable) then consuming cold fat can certainly be beneficial.

Ibn Nafees also mentions that, despite the benefits, consuming this fat can be harmful for the stomach as it’s very difficult to digest. In fact it has pointed out by other
Islamic herbalists, such as Turkmani, that digesting fat is even more difficult than meat which can take up to 3 days to be fully broken down. They thus recommend mixing it with ginger or chilli powder to aid digestion.

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