

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

“Insist upon their quiet and rest, for their limbs are weak;
Try to lift their spirit through welcome words and pleasant company;
Give them sweet-scented perfumes and flowers;
Obtain happiness and music for them;
Spare them somber thoughts and fatigue”

(Al-Urjuzah Fi Al-Tibb by Avicenna)

These are not the words of a faint hearted poet but of a person that the field of medicine perhaps deems itself indebted to. They were written by Ibn e Sina in his medical poem in a time when medical practices in Europe were speckled with gruesome and agonizing treatments as they were considered at the time. In his words he reflects upon the management of the psychological distress an ailing person goes through as he wallows in the misery of disease. These might have been the initial strides on the road to holistic medicine taken by medics besides Hippocrates. Like him Avicenna also believed that the diagnosis of any disease was flawed as well as inadequate unless all aspects of the patient's life were taken into account. This particular notion in today's day and age is becoming the stepping stone for standard modality of treatment in some parts of the world.

It goes without saying that the current medical scenario of da vinci consoles and laparoscopic surgeries has mostly certainly been a journey of evolution studded with extreme passion for discovery and an urge to heal the ailing soul. While we read with observant curiosity about the anatomical conquests earned by grave digging and vivisection done by John Hunter, hand washing practices to prevent puerperal fever by Semmelweis and Galvani's experiments journeying from medicine to the discovery of electricity, we often forget the profundity of knowledge discovered and left as tribute to the field of medicine by Muslim scientists like Al Beruni, Al Razi, Abdul Hassan Ibn Al Haitham and last but not the least Ibn e Sina.

The given portrait is of none other than the eminent polymath Abu Ali Hussain Ibn Abdullah Ibn Al Hassan Ibn Sina often anglicized as Avicenna. Needless to say he is one of the most prominent figures of Unani medicine, often regarded as the father of modern medicine and prince of physicians. Although his contributions span over several areas many of which are absolutely unrelated to medicine but his most conspicuous works are nevertheless related to medicine. His book Qanun Fi Al Tibb or Canon of Medicine is without a doubt considered the single most important book in the history of medicine. Such was the depth and understanding demonstrated in the 5 volume book written by him in the tenth century that it remained the standard

textbook of medicine of many medical schools in Europe for centuries. One of the founding professors of John Hopkins Hospital, Sir William Osler, declared it the most famous medical textbook ever written.

Each of the volumes is divided into 5 broad subjects, that is, a general description of the human body, therapeutic agents, specific diseases, general diseases and pharmacology. His medical poem, Al-Urjuzah Fi Al-Tibb holds poetic and pedagogical reputation and has proven vital in transmission of important medical concepts through Europe spanning over the ages. The 1326 verses which offer a summary of his encyclopaedic textbook are meticulously compartmentalized into various themes dealing with medicine such as diagnosing diseases by identifying symptoms. His theories of quarantine and concepts of contagious and sexually transmitted diseases revolutionized the face of medicine only to become the backbone of medical practices today.

His contributions in the knowledge of chronic conditions like tuberculosis and diabetes have proven instrumental in determining their treatment and prevention. Not only were his contributions significant in developing the discipline of holistic medicine but Avicenna can most certainly be considered among the first diagnosticians in history who took notice of the difference between “signs” and “symptoms”. He also emphasized upon the process of analysing signs and symptoms in order to reach a specific diagnosis. He furthermore accentuated on the variations in treatments in different ailments. Regarding therapeutic agents he was very perceptive about the mechanism of disease as well as the mechanism of medicine used for it.

It has been indisputably established by history that many medical concepts introduced by Avicenna remained the pivot upon which medicine progressed till the 17th century. His position in the Islamic east and Christian west stood and still remains conclusive. It is ostensible that the foundations of today's medicine rest upon the shoulders of giants like Avicenna. It will be to our own advantage that we hold the history of our past in our vision if we desire to progress beyond the bounds of today.