

The Contributions Of Arabs Physicians in Dermatology

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Summary

In this paper, the author attempts to find out the old clinical observations of the distinguished authors in the field of Dermatology. Through this work, we will find many diseases fully described. These descriptions are sometimes as exact as those of today.

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Here are some example on dermatology:

1. Ali Ibn Rabban At-Tabari, Paradise of Wisdom, (Firdaus al-Hikmah) description of Tinea Capitis.
2. Ali Ibn Al-Abbas al-Majusi, Kamil as-Sina'ah, (Al-Malaki), differential diagnosis, lepromatous leprosy, and tuberculoid leprosy.
3. Ar-Razi, Al-Hawi, treatment of alopecia areata, and description of medina-worm or Dracunculiasis.
4. Ibn Sina, Al-Qanun, description of varicella.

These are other examples which the author found in manuscripts not yet edited:

1. Ibn al-Ain Zurbi, treatise, description of carbunculosis
2. Ibn Zuhr, At-Taisir,
 - a. Description of sarcoptes scabiei.
 - b. Description of purpura.
 - c. Description of pityriasis versicolor.

Since the beginning of creation man has treated his outer covering, namely his skin, with care and caution. There are two reasons for this.

First, the skin is the organ most easily visible and unprotected. Second, its diseases and disorders can be obnoxious, odious and harmful.

Skin diseases, regardless of their organic aspects, are taken to be social illnesses because they are so apparent (1). Thus, physicians had to handle dermatology tactfully and carefully during the early stages of its development.

The papyrus was written by an Egyptian sage (1550BC), edited by Eber and the parchment was edited by Hurst are supposed to be dissertations on skin diseases. Moreover, Leviticus, which is one of the five books that was written by Moses, mentioned Leprosy as a social illness (Leviticus 13:2-59). The differential diagnosis of this illness was made by ancient learned men is similar to that is made today (2, 3).

The present article draws upon my readings of the Arab medical books, which I had access to (manuscript included), these are classified chronologically as follows:

1. (Firdous al-Hikmah), Paradise of Wisdom, written by Ali Ibn Rabban At-Tabari. The author lived in the third century of Hijra (ninth century AD).- He introduced this book formally to the Caliph Al-Moutawakel in the year 236H (850 AD).
2. (Al Hawi), the container, written by Abi Bakr Al-Razi. He was born in 236H (850 AD) and died in 318H (932 AD).
3. (Kamil As-Sina'ah), the perfect in industry, (Al Malaki = the Royal), written by Ali Ibn Al Abbas Al-Majussi, who lived during the late third and early fourth century (H). he died in 329H (943 AD). The author presented this treatise to Adad Al Dawla'h al Bauwaihi.
4. (Al-Qanun), The Law, in Medicine, written by Ibn Sina, the Sheikh and the president. He was born in 370H, and died in 428H, (980-1037AD).
5. (Risalat al-Shakfa), Treatise of Shakfa, written by Ibn Al-Ain Zurbi who died in 548H, (1153 AD).

6- (At-Taisir), Facility, by Ibn Zuhr, a descriptive treatise on therapy and management.

These books reveal the methods of Arab physicians adopted in the field of dermatology. This branch of learning falls into three categories. The first includes skin diseases which are a branch of internal diseases, such as tumours, ulcers, pustules, leprosy, and others. The second covers pure skin diseases such as vitiligo and others. The third category covers diseases related to the skin appendages such as hair and nails, classified according to a special order called (al-Zina), i.e. cosmetology.

Arab physicians investigated the nature of these diseases, their causes and effects, and alluded to the fact that illnesses as such were affected by what was called the four complexions or (humours) (al-Akhlāt). This theory was a common feature of the age (4, 5, 6, 7).

A few illustrations demonstrating the notable deeds of Arab physicians in the field of dermatology, can be cited here.

In his *Firdous al-Hikmah* (Paradise of Wisdom) Ali Ibn Rabban At-Tabari, systematically notes some important clinical observations. He describes leprosy in the following statement : (The hairs of the eyebrows disperse; the voice vanishes, the nails contract; the tips of the fingers and the front part of the nose fall away probably the life of the fetus is endangered by contagiousness if the illness made its abode in the sperm. This illness is contagious in contiguity just like itching and smallpox).

In my opinion, these comments on contagiousness are proof of a sound of scientific attitude and reasoning.

Moreover, At-Tabari describes tinea capitis in the following words: (Al Sufa/tinea capitis/grows on the heads of boys) (8, 9). In fact, this statement is highly considered now.

In addition, he annotates scrofuloderma as follows:

(Boys and young men are both liable to this illness. It is, however, curable in boys, but young men are unlikely to be healed). This statement is an excellent piece of information. In his *Al-Qanun* (The Law), Vol. 3p. 132, Ibn Sina affirms this saying: (With boys it is safer, and with young men it is highly incurable) (10).

For the second example, Al-Razi, the prominent clinician has provided us with precise remarks. In his

chapter on clinical cases, Al-Razi speaks of alopecia areata to be found on the scalp. The remedy he prescribes corresponds, in principle, with the treatment we administer now. He describes case no. 22 as follows:

(A man from the House of the Funds consulted me. He was suffering from an Alopecia Areata situated on his head. It occupied a space of two fingers. I advised him to rub it with a cloth until it was about to bleed. I also told him to rub it with an onion. He did as I had told him, but he exceeded the limit I had advised. He continued his rubbing until it peeled off. I ordered him to paint it with the fat of hen. Applying this fat, the injured spot gave way and later passed away. His hair sprouted again in about a month. It grew much better than it had ever been, darker and more abundant).

Al-Razi speaks of a certain illness that he names as Medina-Worm or Dracunculosis. This illness results from a parasitic irritation made by a worm under the skin. In his opinion, the severing or cutting of the worm was a sign of serious danger (11). The syllogism of Al-Razi treatment is still in use at present within the limits of infected areas. Al-Razi states:

(Severe pains are felt in case of the worm's excision or dissection. Consequently, people hand to its end a piece of lead and coil it in order not to be cut. Because of the weight of the lead the worm comes out little by little until it falls down).

Ibn Zuhr adds to the above description the following words:

(The worm penetrates the skin; when it is drawn out and cut the man dies) (12).

The third example is found in Al-Majusi's book *Kamil as-Sina'ah* < The Perfect in Industry >, where he gives a detailed account of leprosy and speaks of the problem of contagiousness mentioned by At-Tabari. He adds that leprosy is of two kinds, one is obnoxious and detrimental, the other is safe and harmless. Al-Majusi says:

(Leprosy is of two kinds: that which results from a melancholic complexion, which is a result of morbidity and sedimentation of blood. This sort does not cause dismemberment in the body. The patient might respond to the treatment and be cured completely if the treatment takes place at its early stage. The other kind is the result of yellow complexion. This sort causes dismemberment in the body and the falling away of the organs. The patient is not apt to be healed).

In the fourth example Ibn Sina, the eminent physician, makes his discourse on perionychia:

(What is Perionychia? It is a hot swelling that is manifest at the nails, accompanied by severe pain and beating. The pain caused might reach to the arm pit; and fever might also take over. If it occurs at the root of the nail, it will lead to the plucking of the nail itself. Its occurrence is generally observed in the hands; and it often swells into a pus. It might result in the disconnection and decomposition of the finger, especially when a nasty substance flows out of it). Ibn Sina refers to an illness named < Al-Homeka'a >. It could be what is known as varicells. He mentions in vol. 3, p. 68, while giving a lecture on smallpox and measles, that: < Al-Jomeka'a > falls somewhere between smallpox and measles. However it is less dangerous than both (10).

The next example concerns Ibn-Ain Zurbi, who devoted a treatise to a disease he called {Al-Shakfa} and we call carbuncles. His description as follows: (It is a warm inflammatory swelling inclined to hotness and stiffness. It is manifest especially on the back between the shoulder) (14). About the prognosis of this lesion he says: (The symptoms of this disease are detected in people with the following characteristics: thoughtful people, old-aged ones, highly melancholic ones). He adds: (If patients suffer also from polyuria the effects are bad. These patients will suffer greatly and most certainly they will die) (14). This is an intelligent observation in that it recognizes the connection between diabetes and carbuncles. The effects were extremely bad since the age of insulin and antibiotics would not arrive until many centuries later.

Another example comes from Ibn-Zuhr's book At-Taisir (which is roughly translated as The Facility). Here we encounter many fine diagnostic and clinical remarks that expressly show the extent of his scrutiny and the broad scope of his knowledge. Of pityriasis simplex which he named (Al-Abria) he said: (The head is sometimes targeted by what is likened to a bran which is particularly seen on the scalp). (12). Among the many treatments he prescribes, mention is made of tar. He says: (If the head is anointed with tar in winter, Al-Abria will fade away). (12). Nowadays tar soap is accepted as one of the best treatments for scalp pityriasis simplex. Under the name Al-Khayalan Ibn-Zuhr describes a disease that resembles what we call today purpura, i.e. spots resulting from the gathering of blood under

the skin. He remarks: (Al-Khayalan, occurs in the body. This is due to the flowing of some of the blood out of the mouths of the blood vessels) (12). Discussing Al-Soua'ah, he describes a disease that is likely to be what we call today scabies. He says:

(It occurs in the outer covering of the body. People know it as Al-Soua'ab. It is an itching on the skin. If the skin is peeled off, a small animalcule comes out of the peeled spot. It is unbelievable small) (12). I think he saw the *Sarcoptes Scabiei*. In fact it was not an easy task to make such an observation, since physicians in the past had no access to microscopes or any other such devices.

In conclusion, I hope that there will be an increase in the number of researchers who are interested in Arab culture. Such men were the harbingers of Arab culture and are now those who encourage us to dig deeper into our past to evaluate the genius of our ancestors who generated light during the darkness of the Middle Ages with the candle of their creative imaginations.

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