

The Prince of Physicians-

Ibn Sina's legacy lives on!



A Science of Medicine
The Art of Care

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This year marks the thousandth-year anniversary of the publication of Ibn Sina's "*Canon of Medicine*" ("*Canon*"). Alas, the significance has largely gone unnoticed in medical circles which is a great pity, as the debt owed by Western medicine to him and his books is incalculable.

Better known as Avicenna in the Western world, Ibn Sina was undoubtedly well to the fore amongst the many brilliant scholars born in 10th century Persia. He lived in the Golden Age of the Islamic Era which saw an unprecedented flowering of talent expressed in superb architecture, exquisite poetry, music, fabrics, silks and ceramics.

When we examine his achievements, his genius is evident from very early on. He was a scholar of immense talent; a polymath that civilisation brings forth only very occasionally, and a formidable philosopher, highly respected even today. Quite early on, he reconciled Islamic philosophy with that of Aristotle and Plato in his seminal book, "*The Book of Healing*". He was a scientist of considerable stature; a leader in chemistry, astronomy and mathematics, in geology and music theory. He was even a poet of some note!

But arguably his enduring legacy was in medicine. He won favour early on in his life by curing the kind of diseases

The five books of the Canon describe the body's natural qualities, internal rhythm and balance (homeostasis), lifestyle factors, the infectious basis of many diseases, and the transmission of disease by contagion.

which had evaded other physicians. This led to a varied and broad career, alas quite short-lived, interspersed with sometimes tumultuous political manoeuvres at the highest level, which culminated in the magnificent *Canon*. This was, fortunately for posterity, translated into Latin, and it rapidly assumed the role of the

standard medical textbook.

The *Canon* is the final condensation of the merger of the Greek medicine of Hippocrates and Galen, and Islamic medicine of the time. It is without doubt one of the most influential medical tomes of all time, and some experts claim the most important. For more than six centuries it served as the bedrock of medical practice, the standard reference and authority throughout the Middle East and Europe until well into the 18th Century.

Even today, its value is still appreciated, and it is used in some Medical Schools on the Indian sub-continent. Few, if any, medical books have been so highly exalted for so long.

But which of his contributions to science make him so exceptional, so worthy of acclaim? Well, he realised that many diseases could be spread through the air we breathe, the water supply, and even through soil. Tuberculosis, then a major source of premature death, was, he claimed, transmitted by touch or contagion. Way ahead of his time, he made the connection between a person's mental state and physical health; in other words, he identified psychosomatic illnesses. Ibn Sina also was the first, as far as we know, to describe diabetes and inflammation of the brain, or meningitis, which helped formulate treatment. He contributed generously to the nascent specialities of gynaecology and paediatrics. Not content with this, as an enthusiastic anatomist, he identified and labelled different parts of the eye and heart valves, and claimed, correctly, that nerves were responsible when experiencing muscle pain.

But what was he like as a person? As far as we know, he was a troubled soul, as most geniuses are, who led a lonely life, and never married. He rarely seemed satisfied, either with himself or with other people. Although witty and charming, physically handsome with an imposing presence, he

Ibn Sina's Canon pre-dates many modern concepts: auto-immune disease, psychotherapy, hereditary factors, lifestyle and clinical trials.

Ibn Sina set standards for disease classification, diagnosis, pain relief, wound healing and the testing of medicines.

reportedly had a violent temper. Ibn Sina was apparently not to be taken on lightly in debate, as he had a barely concealed scorn for lesser mortals, especially if they were wedded to conventional ideas. What drove him? Probably the unending search for truth within the arena of his strong religious beliefs. He had an all-consuming passion and exhilaration for ideas.

If Ibn Sina were to return today, he would no doubt marvel at the medical technology now available, be amazed at the surgical feats being performed, and be most impressed by the range of powerful drugs now available to us. Even so, he would probably be horrified by two features: first, the effort and expenditure given to treating disease, rather than focusing on its prevention, and second, the obsession with suppressing symptoms of disease, instead of seeking a cure. To him, health was not the interval between visits to the doctor's surgery, but the natural, default state a person aspires to. Applying the lifestyle factors, and supporting the person's inner healing, or physis, is the most attractive – and cost-effective – way of conserving health and restoring it when lost.



Ibn Sina: a colossus of medicine

Around the world the debt to this towering genius is recognised in several places of learning and culture. In South Africa the Ibn Sina Institute of Tibb has been active over several years, spreading the word of Graeco-Arabic medicine, of which Hippocrates, Galen and Ibn Sina were the triumvirate of pioneers.

To this day Ibn Sina's portrait still gazes down onto the Main Hall of Faculty of Medicine, University of Paris, in a silent and genuine tribute to his genius and invaluable contributions to medical science. Ibn Sina, Prince of Physicians!