

Why Tibb is: a science of medicine, the art of care

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Competing interests

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Abstract:

Tibb also known as Unani-Tibb, Greco-Arab, Western Holistic, Unani and Persian medicine, is an ancient holistic medical system that originated approximately 10 000 years ago, based on the humoral and temperamental theories that was hypothesised by Hippocrates and Galen. The “completeness” of this medical discipline as “a science of medicine-the art of care” was greatly influenced by renowned scholars including Ibn Sina during the 9th and 13th century, who refined the philosophical principles of; physis, temperament, humours, and the six lifestyle factors, of which physis, the body’s natural ability to heal itself, is a primary principle in the maintenance and restoration of health. Tibb as “a science of medicine” is detailed within the context of Ibn Sina’s principle of cause and effect and the “art of care” is highlighted in the holistic and fully integrative approach of Tibb, based on its philosophical principles. The paper concludes with a brief comparison between Tibb and Western medicine.

Keywords: Tibb; physis; temperament; humours; lifestyle factors; cause and effect.

Background

Tibb, also known as Unani-Tibb, Greco-Arab, Western Holistic, Unani, and Persian medicine, is an ancient medical system that originated approximately 10 000 years ago [1, 2]. The practice and study of Tibb (the Arabic word for medicine) has a long and prolific history combining different medical traditions from Greece, Egypt, India, and China in academic centres like Jundishapur, (in 3rd century AD), which was recognised as a breeding ground for the union among great scientists from different civilizations [3].

Whilst the development of Tibb spanned over thousands of years, tracing its roots from ancient Egypt to the founders of medicine Hippocrates, and Galen, who hypothesised the humoral and temperamental theories [4], the “completeness” of this medical discipline as “a science of medicine-the art of care” was greatly influenced by renowned scholars during the 9th and 13th century, known as the Islamic Golden Age, by amongst others Ibn Zakariya al-Razi, Al-Zahrawi, Ibn Sina, Ibn al-Nafis [5]. During this period, the humoral and temperamental theories were developed into a practice of medicine that covered all aspects from aetiology, pathology, diagnosis, and treatment-as described in Ibn Sina’s Canon of Medicine [6]. The Canon was the primary reference textbook for training of doctors until the end of the seventeenth century in most parts of the world, including Europe. The famous English physician, Nicolas Culpepper (1616-1654) is an example of a renowned Western physician who practiced medicine as described in Ibn Sina’s Canon [7].

Elaborating on Tibb as being “a science of medicine, the art of care”, is based on Ibn Sina’s Canon of Medicine, wherein both the temperamental and humoral theories together with physis and lifestyle factors, are detailed [6]. Additional information has been incorporated from the “Theoretical Principles of Tibb”, published by the Ibn Sina Institute of Tibb in 2018 [4].

Concept of physis

Central to the practice of Tibb is the recognition of “physis”-the body’s vital force, bestowed by God Almighty to human beings, to maintain homeostasis, and where necessary, restore health. Physis is also recognised and accepted as an important principle in Ayurveda, as “Prana”, in Chinese medicine as “Chi” and in Homeopathy as “Life Force”. Hippocrates, the father of medicine described physis as “Vis Medicatrix Naturae”-the body’s natural ability to heal itself [4, 8, 9].

Physis is the administrator of the body. It operates at a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual dimension. Physis oversees all metabolic and homeostatic functions of the body. It comes into effect from the instant of fertilisation and is present until the moment of death, continuously ensuring homeostasis within cells, tissues, organs, and all the different systems of the body, including the immune system. Physis serves to highlight the perfection of creation through its wisdom, the way in which it is constantly monitoring and adjusting the millions of biochemical and physiological pathways that are genetically designed.

Where Physis is efficient enough and thus able to restore homeostasis, a person will not have any signs and symptoms/illness conditions, however if weakened, the individual becomes prone to disease. In Tibb, a physician is the servant of physis as mentioned below.

“Each person carries his own doctor inside him. We are at our best when we give the doctor who resides within each patient, a chance to go to work.” [10] -Albert Schweitzer

The above quotation from Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), bears testimony to the fact that the role of physis in the maintenance and restoration of health, was an important principle in medicine from time immemorial until the beginning of the 20th century.

The word “physician” is derived from the word physis, where the role of the physician is to aid physis in the healing process, not to oppose it-while treatment comes from outside, healing comes from within. Western medicine disregards the role of physis, by interfering

with the body’s physiological and biochemical processes, working against physis.

The acknowledgement and understanding of physis and its role in our bodies, empowers individuals to take responsibility for their health and wellbeing with respect to health promotion and illness management, ensuring an improved quality of life.

Temperament

The temperamental theory is based on the hypothesis that everything in the universe is created from four primary elements with corresponding qualities: Fire (hot & dry), Air (hot & moist), Water (cold & moist), and Earth (cold & dry) [6, 11, 12]. Depending on the ratio of the four primary elements that make up an entity, the opposing qualities in the entity will reach a state of equilibrium, with an overall qualitative state. This overall qualitative state is known as temperament. Every creation, be it mineral, plant or animal, has a particular temperament with an overall qualitative state [13].

Temperament in human beings, is an amalgam of a person’s physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual attributes. Although each person is as unique as their fingerprint, they can be broadly categorized into four temperamental types with respective qualities: Sanguinous (hot & moist); Phlegmatic (cold & moist); Biliary (hot & dry); and Melancholic (cold & dry) [13].

Florence Litauer, in her description of the personality traits of the four temperamental types, mentions that “We need each temperament for the total functioning of the body” [14]. This highlights that whilst each person has personality traits/attributes from all four temperaments, each individual has a dominant temperament, less of a second even less of a third and the least amount of the fourth temperament.

Identifying an individual’s temperamental combination as well as his/her overall qualitative state provides valuable insights into the predisposition of illness conditions, as well as the maintenance of health, within the context of health promotion and illness management [15-17].

The humours

The theory of humours provided a comprehensive understanding of aetiology, pathology, diagnosis, and treatment. This theory remained virtually unchallenged well into the 1800’s [6, 18]. That it survived in the medical sphere for millennia is mute testament to its robustness and flexibility.

In his book, “Al-Umoor Al-Tabi’yah (*Principles of Human Physiology in Tibb*)” Sayed Ahmed describes the role of humours [19]:

“The basis of health is the right proportion and specific equilibrium of humours according to their quality (and quantity) i.e., homeostasis in the internal environment. As long as this homeostasis in the internal environment is maintained, the body remains healthy. -This is the basis of health preservation and preventative medicine. Second, when the normal proportion and specific equilibrium of humours is altered, the internal environment reaches a state of imbalance, and thus disease develops. This is the basis of aetiology and pathology of disease. Third, when this wrong proportion and altered equilibrium of humours is corrected, health can be recovered. -This is the basis of treatment.”

Tibb recognizes that just as each person has a unique temperament, each individual also has a unique humoral composition made up from the four humours: Blood (sanguinous); Phlegm (phlegmatic); Black bile (melancholic); and Yellow bile (biliary). Associated with each humour, are the qualities of heat, coldness, moistness, and dryness, which results in every person having a unique humoral composition, with an overall qualitative state, which if it is in harmony with the overall qualitative state of an individual’s temperament, health will be maintained. Changes to this ideal humoral imbalance occurs from the qualitative effect from Lifestyle Factors, which if beyond the ability of physis to restore homeostasis, will result in signs and symptoms/illness conditions, associated with excess or abnormal humours [20].

Six lifestyle factors

Tibb has identified Six Lifestyle Factors, which affect every individual, also associated with qualities of heat, coldness, moistness, and dryness, that can either be beneficial or harmful to health and well-being. These include Air; Food & Drink; Sleep & Wakefulness; Evacuation and Retention; Body movement and Repose; Mental movement and Repose [6, 21].

Lifestyle factors influence humours by the qualities they exert—for example certain foods such as ginger have heating properties and would therefore increase heat within the body; exercise too, would increase heat; sleep has a cooling effect and emotions such as grief are associated with cold and dry qualities. Whilst physis is responsible to restore balance to the qualities of the humours, to be the same as the overall qualitative state of the temperamental combination, this is not possible if the lifestyle factors are not effectively managed. Optimal management of lifestyle factors are ultimately the cause/s of both health and disease [22].

Relationship between physis, temperament, humours, and the lifestyle factors

The Figure 1 illustrates the constant interplay between temperament, humours, lifestyle factors and physis. Although an individual's temperament is fixed, humours fluctuate constantly as a result of changes from diet and other aspects of lifestyle, such as sleep, physical activity, breathing efficiency and stress levels. This dynamic relationship influences the humoral balance, qualitatively in relation to the temperament, with Physis constantly striving to restore homeostasis. The inability of Physis to restore homeostasis inevitably leads to pathological processes that manifest as clinical disorders [4].

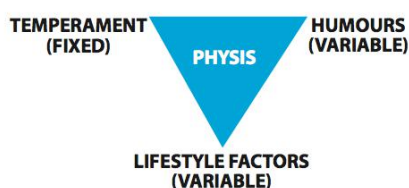


Figure 1 The relationship between physis, temperament, humors, and the lifestyle factors

The principles of cause and effect in Tibb

In addition to the philosophical principles described above, Tibb based on the principles of cause and effect is testimony to it being “a science of medicine”.

Whilst the principles of cause and effect are as referenced in Ibn Sina's Canon of Medicine, the Institute's book “*Theoretical Principles of Tibb*” has elaborated on these principles as mentioned below:

Different Types of causes Ibn Sina lists four different types of causes [4, 6, 11]. These causes are explained within the context of “Coronary Thrombosis”, for ease of understanding [4].

Material cause: The substances upon which health and disease depend. In the case of a coronary thrombosis, for example, it includes disharmony in circulating lipids and glucose, ultimately as a result of a poor diet. Material cause would invariably refer to foods and its derivatives. It is linked to the person's humoral balance.

Formal cause: These are influences which affect the body's constitution. Regarding a heart attack, this would refer to the person's constitution or genetic make-up, and its failure to prevent the build-up of atherosclerotic plaque in the coronary artery. Formal cause is associated with the person's temperament.

Efficient cause: For someone to experience a heart attack, the cause/s will most certainly be associated with poor lifestyle management especially diet, that will lead to structural changes in the heart's arteries. The heart attack could also be triggered by emotional stress. The efficient cause reflects the interaction between an individual and the environment, associated with the six lifestyle factors.

Final cause: This includes compromised functions that lead to other illness conditions. In the case of a heart attack, this can result from

blockages in the coronary artery/ies. The final cause is associated with a malfunction within the body.

Conditions for a cause to have an effect According to Ibn Sina, there are three conditions necessary, for a cause to have an effect [6]. These conditions are explained within the context of “Infections”, for ease of understanding [4].

Active power: There must be sufficient active power. A person may be exposed to a highly pathogenic microbe, and in sufficient numbers, from the air that is breathed, or food that is consumed. Also, the person may be exposed to a particular microbe or toxin for the very first time, will be affected, much more than someone who has been constantly or regularly exposed to the pathogen.

Receptive power: Because of the person's favourable internal environment, which is effectively a culture media, microbes will be capable of exerting a pathological impact if there is sufficient receptive power within the individual's humours, or if the individual's immune system is compromised. This is more likely to happen if the person has not come into earlier contact with the pathogen. Also, certain temperamental types will be more inclined than others to certain illnesses.

Prolonged contact: The third condition relates to the need for prolonged contact between the micro-organism and the person. This means that even if a person's humoral balance is strong enough initially to withstand the onslaught of the pathogen, over a sustained period the immune system can become compromised.

The above philosophical principles of physis, temperament, humours, and lifestyle factors, together with Ibn Sina's principles of cause-and-effect bears testimony to a science of medicine. Taken collectively, it provides a comprehensive understanding of how illnesses develop, and how treatment should be applied.

The art of care

The art of care in Tibb is embodied in Bakhtiar's translation of the Canon, in the definition of medicine (Tibb) where it states: “It is the art whereby health is conserved and the art whereby it is restored after being lost”. This highlights the holistic approach of Tibb, which focuses on both the maintenance and restoration of health. In both instances, whether it is health conservation or restoration, the role of the lifestyle factors within the context of temperament, humours and physis, needs to be considered.

The differences between Tibb and Western Medicine

From the above, the development of Tibb over thousands of years, bears testimony to Tibb being a science of medicine, and the art of care, with a holistic approach of an individual's body, mind, and soul in relation to the environment as described in the Six Lifestyle Factors and within the context of physis which is bestowed to human beings for the maintenance and restoration of health [4].

Comparing the above to Western medicine, which has developed only over the past few centuries and more particularly in the last hundred years, highlight substantial, and clinically important differences. Whilst many health professions of Western medicine, including amongst other dentists, physiotherapists, and other hands-on health professionals, are contributing positively, the training of medical doctors, based on the Germ Theory and the Doctrine of Specific Aetiology, where most illness conditions are linked to a single cause (SARS-CoV-2 causes Covid-19), is opposite to the holistic approach of Tibb where cause/s are invariably associated with poor management of Tibb Lifestyle Factors in relation to an individual's temperament and humours. This lack of understanding of the cause/s of illnesses results in Western medicine treating, mostly symptoms and not the cause/s-is contrary to the holistic approach of Tibb. Moreover, the practice of Western medicine is completely opposite to the Hippocratic principles in medicine.

The technological advancements over the past few decades in understanding the intricate working of the body with respect to physiology, biochemistry, and genetics, has provided insights into the different systems of the body, that has led to the training of medical specialists. This contradicts the holistic and fully integrated nature of

an individual's body, mind, and soul.

Of greater concern are the side effects associated with the development of “new-to-nature”, synthetic medication, based on the receptor theory, which interferes with the genetically programmed physiological and biochemical processes, under the control of physis [23].

Conclusion

The history and development of Tibb, based on the temperamental and humoral theories highlights the importance of a patient centred care and holistic approach. Ultimately it provides a comprehensive understanding of the interaction between the internal and external environments, and the role of physis in the maintenance and restoration of health.

Given the challenges facing healthcare in this Western medicine dominated environment, where the causes of most illnesses are not fully comprehended, resulting in treatment not being effective, there is no doubt that the philosophical principles of Tibb, which accentuates, “a science of medicine, the art of care”, will provide a comprehensive understanding of aetiology, pathology, diagnosis, and treatment, that will greatly benefit medicine in this the 21st century.

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