

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Characteristics of Physicians and Medical Students, According to Ali ibn Sahl Rabban al-Tabari

Abstract

Research on Persian medical literature has revealed a long history of moral excellence and devotion to the medical field. Ali Ibn Rabban Tabari also emphasized the importance of these qualities, as Islamic culture highly values the traits of physicians. In our discussion, we will explore the qualities of physicians and medical students from the perspective presented by Ali ibn Sahl Rabban al-Tabari in his widely read book, *Firdous al-Hikma*. One section of this work focuses on the professional, ethical, and physical qualities that define a doctor and a medical student. The book stands out as one of Iran's medical encyclopedias. Among them is Ali ibn Rabban Tabari, a prominent figure in the history of Persian Medicine, who made significant contributions to the establishment of ethical principles in the field of medicine. His perspectives and insights hold considerable value as one of the earliest endeavors in this area, exerting a substantial influence on the advancement of medical ethics.

Key words: History of Medicine, Persian medicine, Ethics

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Maryam Sadat Bodala (M.Sc. Student)¹

Nafise Shaabani (Ph.D. Candidate)²

Maede Alipour (M.Sc. Student)¹

Narges Tajik (Ph.D. Candidate)²

1- M.Sc. Student of History of Medical Sciences, Department of History of Medical Sciences, Faculty of Health and Religion, Qom University of Medical Sciences, Qom, Iran

2- Department of History of Medicine School of Persian Medicine, Tehran University of Medical Science, Tehran, Iran

Correspondence:

Narges Tajik
Department of History of Medicine
School of Persian Medicine, Tehran University of Medical Science, Tehran, Iran

313.tajik@gmail.com

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Introduction

Iranian doctors have encouraged their students to develop ethical and professional qualities from the very beginning of their medical education. Ancient Iranian medical sources and literature have revealed a long-standing emphasis on morality and dedication to the medical profession (Ghorbanifar, Qaraaty, and Farahi, 2017, pp. 182-187). As early as 6000 years ago, the Assyrians in Mesopotamia enacted Hammurabi's laws, which had an influence on medical ethics (Özek, and Özek, 2008, pp. 537-538). The medical ethics of ancient Iran were shaped by Zoroastrian religious practices and rituals. In Dinkert, in the 6th century AD, the characteristics of an ideal doctor were described (Soltani, 2011, pp. 34-43). The tale of Borzouyeh, the physician, in the book *Kelileh and Demneh*, also exemplifies the high regard for medicine and the foundations of ethics in pre-Islamic Iran (Zargaran, et al., 2015, pp. 23-28).

The advent of Islam in Iran led to an increased focus on the ethical and professional virtues of physicians, in accordance with Islamic teachings (Ghayani, Sadr, and Farbodmanesh, 2005, pp. 41-45).

Virtue and skill were regarded as the two basic pillars of medicine during this period. A hallmark of Muslim physicians of the time, besides their medical expertise, was their association with philosophy, wisdom, and religious and literary studies (including intellectual and narrative sciences). Consequently, the physician in the Islamic society was seen as a wise sage, who used his knowledge, faith, and ethics to uphold the health of his community (Kaadan, 2008, p. 105). The focus on the ethical and professional traits of doctors was especially prevalent during the golden age of scientific discovery in Islamic civilization, as evidenced by the literature of the time (Nasr, 2005, p. 190). Ali ibn Sahl Rabban al-Tabari, a distinguished Muslim physician of this era, details the characteristics of physicians and medical students in his renowned medical book *Firdous al-Hikma*. This article aims to present these characteristics as seen through the eyes of Ali ibn Sahl Rabban al-Tabari.

Method

The present library-documentary research utilized sections of the book, *Firdous al-Hikma*, as the primary source of information to explore the moral propositions in one of the most important original sources of our ancestors.

In this study, ethical propositions were extracted from *Firdous al-Hikmah*, keeping the research's objective in mind. The researchers adopted the content analysis method to dissect the gathered data and formulate opinions. In addition to this, several articles from respected scientific journals were referenced, which were obtained from information databases and search engines like SID, Google Scholar, and PubMed. The internet search was conducted using keywords like medical ethics, the book's name, the author's name, and their Latin equivalents.



Ali ibn Sahl Rabban al-Tabari

There is no consensus regarding the year and place of birth of Abul Hasan Ali ibn Sahl ibn Rabban al-Tabari (Sezgin, 2007, p. 310), also known as Ali ibn Zeil in Al-Fahrest Fahrest (Al-Nadīm, and Ibn Ishāq, 2010, p. 426). While some sources suggest Marv as his birthplace, others indicate Tabaristan (Ibn Abī Uṣaybi'ah, 2001, p. 10). Speculation has led to the mention of 158 AH as his birth year, but according to Meyerhoff, it was actually 193 AH (Sezgin, 2007, p. 310).

His father was a famous Syrian and Christian historian (Sezgin, 2007, p. 310?). In the introduction of *Firdous al-Hikma*, he states that his father was also a physician and was known by the title of Rabban, which means our teacher (Al-Tabari, 1996, p. 2). Probably due to a misunderstanding, he was called a Jew, which was definitely rejected by Mayerhof. (Sezgin, 2007, p. 310). Although some historians have speculated that he may have been Razi's teacher, this assertion has been disproven based on the timeline of Razi's death (Ibn Matran, 2007, p. 306).

Tabari initially served as the secretary of Maziar bin Qaran. Subsequently, he dedicated most of his life to the service of Wathiq and Mutawakkel (Al-Nadīm, and Ibn Ishāq, 2010, p. 426). He began writing the book *Firdous al-Hikma* in Tabaristan and completed it in Samarra during the third year of Mutawakkul's reign. The exact year of his birth and death remains unknown, with some historians placing his death in 250 AH and others in 240 AH. Tabari authored numerous books, although only four have survived, namely *Firdous al-Hikma*, *Hifz al-Sahha*, *Al-Din* and *al-Dawlah*, and *Kitab al-Ard Ala al-Nusari* (Moalemi, M. and Mehrbannejad, 2012, pp. 61-90).

Firdous al-Hikma

Tabari titled the book *Kanash* or *Firdous al-Hikma* and gave it two other names, *Bahr al-Manafee*, and *Shams al-Adab*. He drew upon the works of Hippocrates, Galen, Aristotle, and other philosophers in the field of medicine, as well as contemporary authors, such as Yuhanna ibn Masawaih, the king's physician, and Hunayn ibn Ishaq. (Khan, 1990, pp. 20-23).

In addition, he believes that he must read the writings of his predecessors and collaborate with his teachers because medicine is an art that necessitates perusing and choosing the texts of esteemed and renowned sages. Thus, if he discovered any valuable information within a book, he refrained from discarding even the slightest bit of it. Driven by his insatiable desire to collect more useful content, he translated some of his books from Indian books and then he translated all of them into Syriac and distributed numerous copies in the East and West. In accordance with his viewpoint, it is imperative to acknowledge the sources of every written work, and it is his duty to attribute the name and viewpoints of the primary author in his own book. Tabari says that he did this to respect the intellectual rights of other writers and not to be cursed by God. Furthermore, Tabari proclaims that some portions of his book were extracted from the knowledge found in Indian literature, leaving it to the discerning audience to



determine its veracity or fallibility because some of those contents were inconsistent with each other or with Greek knowledge. Additionally, he elucidates several branches of medicine depicted in diagram number 1 (Al-Tabari, 1996, p. 558; Figure 1).

In this section, Tabari emphasizes the importance of incorporating both the body and mind in a comprehensive medical book. He has also made references to philosophy in his book. Concluding the introduction of *Firdous al-Hikma*, Tabari stated that *Firdous al-Hikma* consists of seven types of knowledge. Each type is further divided into thirty chapters, and each chapter comprises three hundred and sixty parts. (Abdoli, and Mahlooji, 2022, pp. 251-260).

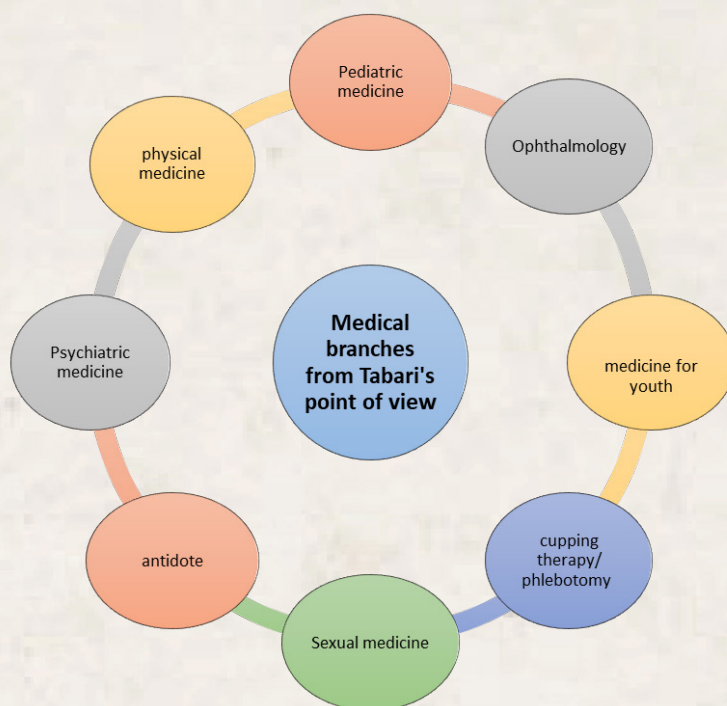


Figure 1. Branches of medicine in the book of *Firdous al-Hikma*.

The Characteristics of Physicians and Medical Students from Ali ibn Sahl Rabban al-Tabari’s Perspective

At the beginning of the introduction of his book, *Firdous al-Hikma*, Tabari points out the role of the doctor as an intermediary in the wise system of creation and states that the true healer is God and the doctor is a manifestation of the names of God (Shafi: healer), and says: “His name is taken from the name of Allah.” Tabari then has some recommendations for physicians (Al-Tabari, 1996, p. 4).

His recommendations regarding the doctor’s appearance are as follows: The physician should be fit, clean, and well-groomed, and should not wear old clothes; he should smell good, but avoid excessive use of perfume. In terms of conduct, a doctor



should exhibit piety, purity, dignity, humility, kindness, and a broad knowledge of various literatures. Tabari values actions over words and disapproves of verbosity at the expense of action. Accordingly, he states that "A doctor's intentions should be evident in their conduct, not in their words."

The vices listed by Tabari for a doctor are as follows: arrogance, presumption, sarcasm, and speaking ill of fellow medical professionals. (Al-Tabari, 1996, pp. 4-7).

Tabari emphasizes that a doctor should aim for excellence and moderation in all aspects of their practice. Instead of pursuing wealth, doctors should be looking for reputation, although they should not become overly focused on fame.

He believes that a doctor should cover the flaws in order to be popular and be known as wise. He also warned against initiating treatment without acquiring adequate knowledge, skills, and understanding of medications. In Tabari's view, medication in the hands of the ignorant and inexperienced practitioner is like a poison that will be fatal if it is used at an inappropriate time or in the wrong amount.

Tabari advises that a doctor should be helpful, benevolent, and sympathetic to patients. He should be more compassionate and charge less in case the patient's family cannot afford it, and refrain from prescribing medicine for patients who recover with food and abstinence.

Echoing the words of Hippocrates, Tabari counsels that if a doctor cannot identify the ailment in a patient's body, they should not administer medication. This is because, in the absence of a disease to treat, the medication may attack the body's natural chymus and induce illness.

Tabari warns physicians against the use of harmful and toxic drugs (Al-Tabari, 1996, pp. 4-7).

Tabari also suggests that physicians should prioritize accurate diagnosis before initiating treatment, avoid hasty interventions, and confirm their initial diagnosis with multiple tests for utmost certainty. He points out that a single medicine may prove beneficial for one patient while causing harm to another due to a variety of factors:

1. due to the differences in temperament or the potential for the medicinal plant not being cultivated correctly in a certain city,
2. or the possibility of the physician making a mistake in preparing the medicine,
- 3 or due to the doctor's unawareness of the counteractive properties of one drug against another,
4. Or the physician's ignorance of the specific timing for the drug's application in accordance with the season.

In treating a disease, Tabari emphasizes that the doctor should collaborate with the patient, nurses, and the patient's family. United in their efforts against the disease, they can achieve recovery. However, if either the doctor or nurses act in opposition to the patient's needs, it could result in the disease getting worse. He stresses that it is necessary for a knowledgeable and smart doctor to be close to the patient, to mitigate the illness and boost the patient's strength (Al-Tabari, 1996, pp. 4-6).



If a person believes they are ill, they might indeed get sick. If they agree with the doctor’s advice and follow the prescribed treatment, they are likely to recover. However, if they disagree with the doctor’s recommendations, their condition could potentially worsen.

If the patient wants something that is slightly harmful to him, he should not be stopped from it as their body will metabolize it due to the strong desire. If a beneficial medication does not agree with the patient’s system, it should not be administered again. This is because if the patient’s system rejects it, the body will not accept it (Al-Tabari, 1996, pp. 4-7).

The patient should be shielded from distressing reports or exceedingly joyful news that could put a strain on their heart. Suitable environmental conditions should be created for the patient to rest, as the patient is constantly battling the disease until they recover.

In the end, Tabari stated that anyone who properly follows these guidelines will be blessed in their endeavors, and God will grant them healing. They will find contentment in this world and the next.

Tabari dedicates a section of his book to the ethical conduct of medical students. He outlines the unique qualities of students in this field, which stand out among the scholars of the Islamic era. These features are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of medical students from the perspective of Ali Ibn Rabban Tabari

Smart	Mental characteristics
Kind	
Humble	
Compassionate	
generous	
noble	
pious	Moral characteristics
tactful	
polite	
serious	
Avoid arrogance, jealousy, lies, and slander.	
He did not get discouraged by the difficulties and finished the work.	
He should abandon reading the book from sunset to dawn, during thunder and lightning, earthquakes, eclipses, the hardships and sufferings of kings, and inauspicious times.	Educational characteristics
When he is sitting next to his teacher and reading, he would stop his reading if an intruder, a dog, or a cat entered the vicinity as in such times, Satan gets opportunities to mislead students.	
Good looking	Appearance characteristics
Clean	



Conclusion

Persian medicine, as one of the influential schools in medicine, provides a rich source of ethical guidelines. Evidence of this assertion is observable in *Firdous al-Hikma*, the first medical encyclopedia of its time. Furthermore, Tabari's work not only focuses on the appearance, morality, and professional traits of doctors but also dedicates a portion of his book to the attributes of medical students. It is this unique aspect that sets *Firdous al-Hikma* of Tabary apart from other Iranian medical encyclopedias.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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