

# ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## The Challenge of Medical Charlatanism in Adab al-Tabib: A Historical Review

### Abstract

Medical charlatanism is a significant topic in historical manuscripts from the golden age of Islamic medicine. The topic has been dealt with substantially in *Adab al-Tabib*, an epic work by AI-Ruhawi (12th century AD). In this paper, we review the challenges to medical charlatanism in *Adab al-Tabib*. AI-Ruhawi has offered a variety of strategies to fight against this phenomenon. We classified these strategies into prevention of and combating medical charlatanism. The formulation of a multifaceted assessment of candidates to medical training, respect for physicians and their rights, assessment of a medical practitioner's competence and promotion of spiritual, ethical and religious values are considered preventive strategies. Strategies in the fight against charlatanism include monitoring a physician's performance and exposure of charlatanism to the authorities. AI-Ruhawi has correctly understood the enormous risk posed by medical charlatanism and has provided practical and useful guidelines for its prevention and combating existing cases.

**Key words:** Adab al-Tabib, AI-Ruhawi, Medical charlatanism, Preventive strategies, Strategies to combat

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## Introduction

Medical charlatanism is a common global challenge to healthcare systems. Serious damage arising from its occurrence require governments to adopt laws and policies to fight against it.<sup>1</sup> It has been a major concern of physicians throughout history. The subject has been addressed in ancient Greek and Rome sources. Hippocrates has referred to it in his celebrated oath and in his texts on the subject of ethics, such as *Law and Decorum*.<sup>2</sup> Galen has condemned medical charlatans in his writings.<sup>3</sup>

The golden age of Islamic medicine (800-1300 AD) is a significant and valuable period of medical history. In this era, eminent scholars and leading physicians such as Avicenna, Rhazes and Ibn al-Nafis made major contributions to medical science. Their invaluable works were translated by European scholars and published widely in scientific societies during the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup> In the golden age of Islamic medicine, special attention was paid to ethics and medical law that stemmed from the moral principles and ethical doctrines of Islam. Muslim scholars have written about medical ethics and patient rights. Several books and treatises have been dedicated to medical ethics.<sup>5,6</sup>

Ishaq ibn Ali al-Ruhawi (12<sup>th</sup> century AD) was a leading author in the field of medical ethics and law as it related to Islamic medicine. *Adab al-Tabib* (Practical Ethics of the Physician) is a well-known work in Arabic on medical ethics by this great scholar. In his book, al-Ruhawi presented organized guidelines and recommendations for functional medical ethics.<sup>7,8</sup> Medical charlatanism was considered to be a most important issue by al-Ruhawi. He discusses medical charlatanism throughout *Adab al-Tabib* and offers strategies to combat it.<sup>9</sup> This article reviews the challenge of medical charlatanism as discussed in *Adab al-Tabib*.

## Ishaq ibn Ali al-Ruhawi

Biographical information about Ali al-Ruhawi in historical sources is scant. His name is not mentioned in many historical works, thus information about him is incomplete. Historical evidence suggests that he was born in *Ruha*, a city in Mesopotamia which is today called *Urfa*. He lived in the second half of the third century AH (12th century AD).<sup>10,11</sup>

*Uyun al-Anba fi tabaqat al-atibba*, a historic biographical dictionary, has listed three works by al-Ruhawi: *Adab al-Tabib*; a collection of four books based on the writing of Galen and; *al-Konash*, a book on pharmacology adapted from the works of Galen.<sup>12</sup> In addition, in *Adab al-Tabib*, al-Ruhawi has summarized another of his treatises on qualify-

- 1- Earl Heilman, 1943: 22-23.
- 2- Pormann, 2005: 189-227.
- 3- Todman, 2007: 975-76.
- 4- Majeed, 2005: 1486-7.
- 5- Padela, 2007:169-78.
- 6- Faruqi, 2006: 391-99.
- 7- Chamsi-Pasha, 2013: 673-75.
- 8- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 38-248.
- 9- Ibid.
- 10- Levey, 1967: 1-100.
- 11- Zikria, 1981: 79-80.
- 12- Usayba, 2013: 612.



ing examinations for medical students.<sup>13</sup> Al-Ruhawi was a prominent physician and a pioneer of medical ethics in the early ages of Islamic medicine.

### **Adab al-Tabib**

*Adab al-Tabib* is a medical textbook on the subject of medical ethics written in Arabic by al-Ruhawi. The name of the book illustrates the theme; *Adab* is an Arabic word which roughly translates as “ethics”.<sup>14,15</sup> Although *Adab al-Tabib* is well-known in the field of medical ethics, beyond that it also contains remarkable discussions on medical law. The preface to the book states that the author’s goal in writing *Adab al-Tabib* was to provide a complete collection of essential moral principles and ethical policies for physicians.<sup>16,17</sup> The book was translated into English using the manuscript in Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul (number 1658) by Martin Levey in 1967.<sup>18</sup>

The book consists of 20 chapters addressing topics related to medical ethics. Its style indicates that it was written with the aim of training medical students. Al-Ruhawi provides the essentials of medical ethics in the form of guidelines and presents the useful and practical contents with remarkable accuracy. He has quoted Greek philosophers and scholars such as Aristotle, Galen and Hippocrates and has cited ancient Greek medical scholars in many cases.<sup>19</sup>

Al-Ruhawi has concentrated on various aspects of the personal and social life of physicians.<sup>20</sup> The major topics in the book are listed in Table 1. He offers detailed recommendations about different situations in which physicians may find themselves. The recommendations are carefully detailed and even include advice about personal hygiene, such as brushing of teeth and the use of scent in some parts of the book. Interestingly, the target audience of the book does not only include physicians, but provides good tips for members of the entire health care system, including pharmacists, health care providers, the families of patients and even the patient himself.<sup>21</sup>

Although *Adab al-Tabib* is a book about medical ethics, a major part is dedicated to medical and health science. Above all, al-Ruhawi believed that the body and spirit are closely linked and that medical ethics and medical science are not separate fields. Many of the recommendations about lifestyle modification promote the ethical values of a physician. According to al-Ruhawi, it is not possible for a doctor to maintain ethical discipline without an accompanying ethical lifestyle.<sup>22</sup>

Al-Ruhawi placed great emphasis on the acquisition of

- 13- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 208-21.
- 14- Sartell, 2015: 756-61.
- 15- Pormann, 2005:189-227.
- 16- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 38-248.
- 17- Sartell, 2015: 756-61.
- 18- Levey, 1967: 1-100.
- 19- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 38-248.
- 20- Ibid.
- 21- Ibid.
- 22- Ibid.



**Table 1:** The major topics in *Adab al-Tabib*

Area	Topics
Private life of physician	Advice about loyalty and faith
	Lifestyle modification measures
	Medical charlatanism
Social life of physician	Explanation of valuable position of the medical profession
	Responsibilities of populace and rulers towards physicians
	Medical charlatanism
Professional life of physician	General principles of taking a medical history and physical examination
	Medical ethics and professional standards
	Physician-patient relationship
	Medical charlatanism
Health system overall	Recommendations relating to the system of governance
	An examination system for physicians and scrutinizing their professional competence
	Recommendations to health care providers
	Advice to those visiting patients
	Advice to patients and those accompanying them
	Medical charlatanism

23- Hashemi, 2016: e21132.

24- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 38-248.

25- Ibid.

26- Ibid.

professional knowledge by physicians and outlined essential medical components of the training of physicians. In this context, *Adab al-Tabib* makes numerous references to medical conditions. For example, this book is one of the first on Islamic medicine to provide an elementary description of sciatica.<sup>23</sup> It appears that al-Ruhawi has reviewed other medical works in this book to provide medical students with a better understanding of professional ethics. It could be argued that the joint focus on physical and ethical issues related to physicians represents al-Ruhawi's remarkable clinical perspective on medical ethics.<sup>24</sup>

### Medical charlatanism in *Adab al-Tabib*

Al-Ruhawi felt that physicians have a God-given profession that should be considered a work of the Divine. His recognition of the sacred nature of this vocation required that he warn incompetent people from entering the medical profession. From al-Ruhawi's perspective, the definition of a medical charlatan included dishonest and bogus doctors as well as physicians who were solely seeking fame and money.<sup>25</sup> Table 2 lists the characteristics of a charlatan extracted from the book.

Medical charlatanism is one of the most significant topics based on the author's perspective.<sup>26</sup> Table 1 makes it clear that medical charlatanism relates to the private, social and



**Table 2:** Main characteristics of a medical charlatan.

His motivation for entering the medical profession is solely to gain power and wealth.
He lacks understanding of the sacred status of the medical profession.
He lacks sufficient medical knowledge and skills.
He lies to and deceives patients.
He practices pseudoscience and makes extraordinary claims.
He obtains money fraudulently and from trade.

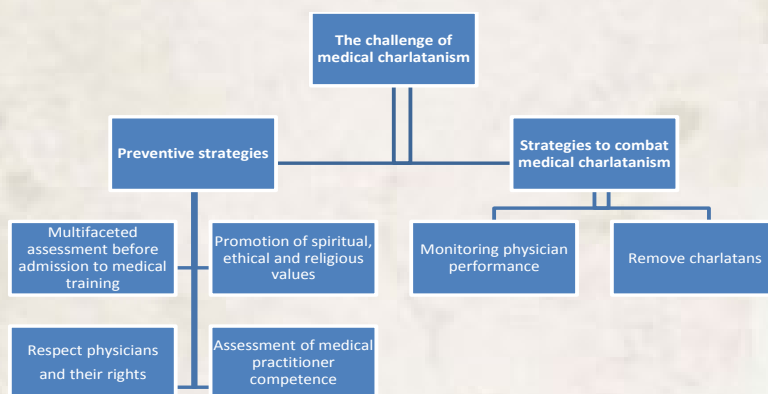
27- AI-Ruhawi, 2011: 38-248.  
 28- Ibid.  
 29- Pormann, 2005: 189-227.  
 30- AI-Ruhawi, 2011: 30-31.  
 31- Pormann, 2005: 189-227.  
 32- AI-Ruhawi, 2011: 38-248.

professional life of a physician and the healthcare system. AI-Ruhawi believed that the status of medicine had declined during his era, which he attributed to the development of charlatanism in the medical system. He discusses medical charlatanism in almost all parts of the book and devotes three chapters of the book to it. It was so important to the author that it is mentioned in the introduction.<sup>27</sup>

AI-Ruhawi criticizes medical charlatanism clearly and describes charlatans in unpleasant terms. He emphasizes the risk of incompetence and dishonest individuals in the health care system.<sup>28</sup> It appears that medical charlatanism was a common problem during the era.<sup>29,30</sup> Islamic medicine, like the other systems throughout medical history, dealt with medical charlatanism.<sup>31</sup>

**The challenge of medical charlatanism**

The text of *Adab al-Tabib* shows clearly that al-Ruhawi did not simply criticize medical charlatanism, but offered a variety of strategies to fight it. The strategies encompass every aspect of the personal and social life of a physician, in addition to the health care and social system. In this article, we classify these as preventive strategies and ways to combat charlatanism. Figure 1 summarizes strategies for use against medical charlatanism in *Adab al-Tabib*.<sup>32</sup>



*Figure 1. Strategies for use against medical charlatanism in Adab al-Tabib.*



### Preventive strategies

As al-Ruhawi believed in the primacy of preservation of health and prevention over treatment, he emphasized prevention of the emergence of charlatanism in the medical community. His first and foremost preventive strategy was adherence to principles and strict rules regarding admission of students to medical training. Al-Ruhawi believes that assessment of the moral, mental and physical health of an individual is required before the beginning of medical training. If issues arise during assessment, the teacher must pay to remedy the issue as much as possible before the start of training.<sup>33</sup>

Al-Ruhawi stresses that not all individuals have the competence and natural talent to become physicians. He believed it was a waste of time for medical professors to endeavor to train unqualified individuals. He felt that the children of physicians were the best candidates to train in the medical profession because they had acquired the necessary physical and moral characteristics under the supervision and training of their fathers and required less training to prepare to study medicine. From the perspective of al-Ruhawi, a major cause of the decline in the practice of medicine was the entry of unqualified persons into the medical system. He advocated implementation of strict rules for admission to medical schools.<sup>34</sup>

The second preventive strategy was to promote medical ethics and moral virtues. In this regard, al-Ruhawi makes several recommendations to physicians. The study of religious and moral works, adherence to religious practices and consultation with medical scholars and experts are some of these. He also emphasizes the study of specialized medical text books by which to increase the knowledge and skills of a physician to attain the necessary qualification.<sup>35</sup>

Respecting physicians and their rights by the population and rulers are the third preventive policy. According to al-Ruhawi, the negligence and failure of the populace to observe the rights of physicians has caused a decline in the medical profession, because doctors have been forced to engage in trade to earn money. All people, especially rulers and the wise should venerate their physicians and reward them. This would reduce the physician's material incentive to engage in charlatanism.<sup>36</sup>

Al-Ruhawi discussed the abuse of women, travelers and the illiterate by charlatans and emphasized that these individuals are less equipped to detect charlatans. He designed a system for examination of physicians to evaluate their competence. This system helps detect charlatans and thus prevent potential abuse. This is al-Ruhawi's final preventive strategy. The

33- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 202-207.

34- Ibid.

35- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 38-248.

36- Ibid: 184-95.



examination of physicians is actually a combination of an in-depth interview and a practical exam. Physician knowledge, attitudes and beliefs would be assessed through in-depth interview while their skills and expertise would be evaluated by a practical exam. The examination system would expose quacks and empirics to the population and the government. It also encourages physicians to study further to improve their medical knowledge and skills.<sup>37,38</sup> Al-Ruhawi also made a great effort to present the characteristics of charlatans and expose their tactics in *Adab al-Tabib*.<sup>39</sup>

### Strategies to fight medical charlatanism

Al-Ruhawi placed a valuable and sacred status on the practice of medicine and considered it to be among the most honorable of occupations. He could not tolerate the presence of quacks alongside physicians. Al-Ruhawi believed that charlatans threatened the social status of medicine and felt they should be punished for usurping a profession that they did not deserve.<sup>40</sup> At the other extreme, al-Ruhawi was concerned about human health. He warned against the risks of involvement of unqualified persons in treating patients. He described the damage caused by this intervention as irreparable and fatal and he considered it necessary to deal with offenders and charlatans in order to protect public health. Al-Ruhawi laid great emphasis on an ethical approach in the medical system. He has condemned charlatans because of their vices and strongly criticized them in several parts of *Adab al-Tabib*. It can be assumed that al-Ruhawi proposed to fight medical charlatanism with the aim of upholding moral values.<sup>41</sup>

Al-Ruhawi dedicated a chapter of *Adab al-Tabib* to suggesting ways by which rulers and the government could fight medical charlatanism.<sup>42</sup> He first explained the importance of fighting against charlatanism and then stressed the critical responsibility of rulers. He wanted the government to reject charlatans as if they were repelling an enemy. Al-Ruhawi described any negligence in this fight as dangerous and harmful to the extent that rulers may even be deceived by charlatans and be led to their own deaths. He stated it was thus necessary for governmental officials and a nation's experts to monitor physician performance and report the results to the ruler.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

Medical charlatanism is an important and overriding issue in *Adab al-Tabib*. It has been addressed in most parts of the book such that it has become a major theme. Al-Ruhawi has

- 37- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 208-21.
- 38- Sadeghi et al, 2017: 389-397.
- 39- Ibid: 227-35.
- 40- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 38-248.
- 41- Ibid.
- 42- Padela, 2007: 169-78.
- 43- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 222-26.



understood correctly the enormous risk of medical charlatanism and has provided practical and useful guidelines for its prevention and to combat it. The intense attention to medical charlatanism in *Adab al-Tabib* demonstrates the prevalence of the problem during al-Ruhawi's era. It also demonstrates the consideration of medical ethics and patient rights during the age of Islamic medicine. *Adab al-Tabib* provides wonderful advice about confronting the challenge of medical charlatanism.<sup>44</sup>

44- Al-Ruhawi, 2011: 38-248.

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