

# ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## *Abdullah Bin Anis, An Uncelebrated Physician of the 7th Century*

### **Abstract**

One well-cited assertion in the literature is a lack of data about health, physicians and their lives in Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century, which is expected due to deficiency of original resources from that time.

Previous studies identified only three physicians without remarkable data about their lives. This article introduces *Abdullah bin Anis*, a new physician who was unknown previously and presented novel information about medicine and its practice in Prophet *Muhammad's* time (ca 609).

**Key words:** Arabic Medicine, Traditional Medicine, History of Medicine, Medieval

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## Introduction

Following the emergence of Islam and invitation of people to Islam by Prophet *Muhammad* (PBUH)(approximately 609 AD), a new chapter of history began. It was with setting up a new governmental organization by overthrowing pre-existing principles and the cultural doctrine of the time. Medicine is the key element of every healthy society. It is of interest and essential to investigate during this time; however, it is difficult for the lack of written compilations, harmonious and clear data from this era<sup>1</sup>.

To date, only a few medical documents of the pre-Islamic era are available from the Arabian Peninsula. It is believed that most of them are derived from Prophet *Muhammad*'s own speeches, or they are deeply embedded within the biography of the well-known individuals and even characteristics of the Islamic society of that time. On the other hand, these documents are still scattered in various sources such as historical, religious, a biography of the recognized men not necessarily written in a way that is intended for medical purposes. Basically, most of these documents were written three centuries after the Prophet *Muhammad*'s death.<sup>2,3</sup>

Generally, the contexts of those medical documents are divided into two categories. First, Prophet *Muhammad*'s speeches about medicine or health. Second, local practitioners and physicians who might have a relationship with scientific centers of that age such as Jundishapur, Yemen, and Alexandria.<sup>4-6</sup>

Physicians of this time are countable. Medical history references mention only three of them: «*Al-Harith ibn Kalada of the tribe of Thaqif*», his son «*Al-Nadr*» and «*Ibn Abu Ramitha al-Tamimi*»; they introduced unknown physicians and unprecedented information about the medical practice of fifteen centuries ago.<sup>7,8</sup>

### ***Abdullah bin Anis***

*Abdullah bin Anis* is a physician which is mentioned in a book called «the great invasion of Yemen» written by *Abu al-Hasan al-Bakri* (before 1294 AD) who was known by his narrations of story-like historical events. In this book, he describes the Yemen invasion by Muslims and defeat of *Ra's al-Ghoul*. *Abdullah bin Anis* was one of the main characters in his story and played an important role in Muslim victory. He has been described as an intelligent, eloquent and expert person in medicine and surgery. This is important to note on his unique character that he can typify physicians' features in that time.<sup>9</sup>

*Abdullah bin Anis* role as a physician begins when *Ra's al-*

- 1- Savage-Smith, 1996: 907.
- 2- Savage-Smith, 1996: 905.
- 3- Ebrahimnejad, 2011: 170.
- 4- Savage-Smith, 1996: 907.
- 5- Ebrahimnejad, 2011: 170.
- 6- Khan, 2008: 6.
- 7- Savage-Smith, 1996: 908.
- 8- Ibn Abi Usaibia, 2000: 386, 395, 400.
- 9- al- Bakri, 1966: 122-123.



*Ghoul* army captures *al-Zubair*, one of the Muslim leaders of the time. Abdullah takes permission from Prophet *Muhammad* to enter into the enemy army to release *al-Zubair*. He wears a white dress and physician's turban similar to the physicians of around 1000 years ago. This is the first reliable document about physicians uniform of its kind.<sup>10</sup>

After his entrance into the enemy's military front, Abdullah cried in a poet like: «I'm physician, I have learned how to cure and treat and I relief the pains». It is clearly understood that in those times, physicians were peripatetic and should introduce themselves to people by proclaiming.<sup>11</sup>

Although *Ra's al-Ghoul* army was in the fight, they warmly accepted Abdullah and respected him. But since Abdullah was not familiar to them, he had to prove himself for the abilities he had. For this reason, he had been asked to treat around forty of their wounded soldiers. Two results are infirmed from this adventure. The physicians to prove their skills must pass a kind of repeated exams –such as treatment of 40 wounded soldiers. Moreover, these exams represent a commitment to medical ethics. It was revealed that soldiers were basically used for the assessment of physicians' competence to treat leaders later on.<sup>12</sup>

Abdullah, who was a qualified physician after passing that so-called exam successfully, had more respect and was accepted. As a result, he was taken to *Ra's al-Ghoul* and the story continued. *Ra's al-Ghoul* asked the reason for Abdullah's skill and proven abilities again. Consequently, *Ra's al-Ghoul* asked him "I would like you to treat my servant who has been wounded in the fight." Abdullah treated the slave using the medicines that he had. By that, he gained specific respect from *Ra's al-Ghoul*. *Ra's al-Ghoul* gave a vestment to him and ordered minister to honor Abdullah as much as possible.<sup>13</sup>

The minister started to praise him by saying that «I have not seen a physician with these abilities in my entire life». *Ra's al-Ghoul* conformed minister's utterance and said: «*Abdullah* is a skilled and clever physician as well as being a wise man. He has a great value to me». Then, *Ra's al-Ghoul* ordered to provide Abdullah with an excellent watchful place to observe the fighting between Moslems and heathens. This text shows that social affair was important to physicians.<sup>14</sup>

Since Abdullah had a trusted personality, he went deep into the enemy territories in order to visit the patients and find medicinal plants, while he was actually spying on the *al-Zubair* news. He heard that *al-Zubair* had escaped, thus he stole their sacred fetish and returned back to his people. By this, it is clear that Abdullah did not treachery in medical practice as

10- al-Bakri, 1966: 122-123.

11- Ibid.

12- Ibid.

13- al-Bakri, 1966: 124.

14- al-Bakri, 1966: 125.



it is in confidence, but he paid attention to the value of soft power in war.<sup>15</sup>

15- al-Bakri, 1966: 130.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it is inferred that *Abdullah bin Anis* was another new physician who was identified beside three other famous and reputed physicians. He wore a special white uniform; such physicians were peripatetic and introduced themselves by proclaiming. However, there were few experimental procedures for the physicians to be recognized as a qualified physician and finally, they enjoyed special trust and respectt.

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