

Traditional Arabic and Islamic Medicine: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Traditional medicine is very popular among the population around the world, especially in the Arab region. From the founding of Islam in the 6th century, the Arabic world became the center of medical knowledge. Traditional Arabic and Islamic Medicine (TAIM) was developed in medieval times and practiced in various Arabic countries today. It contains ancient healing wisdom and guidelines for healthy living. Past down from generation to generation, the medical herbs, seeds, roots, and oils have been utilized to treat a wide range of illnesses and diseases. Understanding TAIM will enhance the ability of traditional healer to provide culturally sensitive care to Arab and Muslim patients. This paper provides introduction to the traditional medicine commonly used in the Arab community.

KEYWORDS: *traditional medicine, Arabic traditional medicine, Islamic traditional medicine*

INTRODUCTION

From the beginning of time, man has relied on natural products, such as plants, animals, microorganisms, and marine organisms, in medicines to alleviate and treat diseases. The traditional Chinese medicine have flourished for hundreds of years. Arab and Muslim scholars introduced hundreds of natural products, mainly medicinal plants and animal parts and products. These included natural products (plants and animal products) mentioned in the Holy Qur'an and in the Prophetic tradition. Natural products can broadly be classified into three groups: Herbal-based, animal-based, or mineral-based products. The treatment of human ailments by using medicines derived from animals is known as zotherapy [1].

In medieval times or middle ages (lasted from around 476 C.E. to 1453 C.E.), Islamic scholars wrote extensively on medication, clinical practices, diseases, diagnoses, cures, and treatments. The genius of the medieval Arabs lay in their extraordinary receptivity to new ideas. Medicine was part of medieval Islamic culture. While Europe was in the

so-called Dark Ages, Islamic scholars were busy translating Greek and Roman medical records, building on the work of the Greeks and Romans, and making discoveries in medicine. The medieval Islamic world produced some of the greatest medical thinkers in history. Medieval Islamic medications were usually plant-based and largely depended on herbs and superstition [2]. Figure 1 shows special tools used by medieval surgeons [3]. In the Middle Ages, some women from the families of famous physicians received elite medical training. Such wise woman would provide potions, typically shown in Figure 2 [3].

The Arabian conquests during and after the 7th century led to a spread of Islam as well as the teachings of the Qur'an (Koran) on health. The advent of Islam gave rise to impressive discoveries in many fields, especially medicine. Islamic scholars developed new techniques in medicine, dissection, surgery and pharmacology. They founded the first hospitals, introduced physician training, and wrote

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encyclopedias of medical knowledge. Ideas and techniques from Islamic doctors brought many new advances to European medicine [4]. Religion, ethics, and science all came together to produce one of the most fruitful eras in the history of medicine.

CONCEPT OF ARABIC TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The Arabic traditional medicine (also known as Islamic traditional medicine, Traditional Arabic and Islamic Medicine, or Hilla) is a holistic system of medicine which dates back to 14 centuries ago. It refers to medicine developed in the medieval Islamic civilization and mostly written in Arabic, the lingua franca of the Islamic civilization. Hotness, coldness, moistness, and dryness are four temperaments that naturally occur in every existing substance including living creatures [5].

The traditional Arabic and Islamic medicine (TAIM) is a system of healing practiced since antiquity in the Arab world (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Qatar, Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), etc. It is the culmination of Graeco-Roman, Chinese, Persian, and Ayurvedic practices. It consists of medicinal herbs, dietary practices, mind-body practices, spiritual healing, and applied therapy. The development of TAIM started with the Prophet. A unified TAIM conceptual model is shown in Figure 3 [6].

Medicine of the Prophet is based on the Quran and other Islamic texts and traditional herbal remedies. It is not based on medical experiments but rather on inspiration and accumulated medical knowledge from ancient culture and tradition. According to a Hadith, the stomach is the core of the body and origin of many diseases: "The stomach is the central basin of the body, and the veins are connected to it. When the stomach is healthy, it passes on its condition to veins, and in turn the veins will circulate the same and when the stomach is putrescence. Mohammad's approach to herbal medicine is very much rooted in the humoral concepts. The distinguishing feature of herbal medicine as practiced for purging and adjusting the Four Humors – Blood, Phlegm, Yellow Bile and Black Bile. The theory held that four different bodily fluids (or humors) influenced human health. Medical establishments believed that levels of these humors would fluctuate in the body, depending on what people ate, drank, inhaled, and what they had been doing. The theory lasted for 2,000 years, until scientists discredited it.

The Muslims put a premium on cleanliness and dietary regime. The ritual cleansing of the body precedes each of the five daily prayers. Disease was regarded as divine punishment for the sins of man.

Islam emphasizes on equilibrium among man, his soul, and the universe. All aspects of Islamic thought must conform to Muslim worldview as indicated in the Qur'an. Knowledge is legitimate so long as it remains within the framework of the worldview. Islamic medicine is closely bound up with the principles of the faith.

Muslim healers rely on both physical and spiritual means to cure disease and promote wellness. Both the healers and patients generally believe that Allah (God) would provide treatment for every illness. God forbids us to do harm to others and imposes on physicians the oath not to compose harmful remedies.

The healers often use verses in the Kuran to go along with their treatments. Healing may require dietary practices and prayer. In addition to the obligatory fast of Ramadan, there are various optional fasts for maintaining physical health. Fasting also carries immense spiritual rewards as the desired effects occur in the realm of the soul and its evolution. Water from a well located in Mecca, the holiest place in Islam, can also be used for healing [7].

The Persian physician, Ibn Sina, wrote "The Canon of Medicine." He explains considerations for testing new medicines, known as the Avicenna's rules:[8]:

1. The drug must be pure and not contain anything that would reduce its quality.
2. The investigator must test the drug on one simple disease, not a condition that could have various complications.
3. They should test the medication on at least two distinct diseases, because sometimes a drug might treat one disease effectively and another one by accident.
4. A drug's quality must match the severity of the disease. For example, if the "heat" of a drug is less than the "coldness" of a disease, it will not work.
5. The researcher must time the process carefully, so that the action of the drug is not confused with other confounding factors, such as the natural healing process.
6. The drug's effect must be consistent with several trials showing the same results. In this way, the investigator can rule out any accidental effects.
7. Investigators must test the drug on humans, not animals, as it may not work in the same way for both.

ARABIC HERBS

Herbal medicines are very common in the Arab world. They play a significant role in disease

management in Arabic nations. Herbs were produced to resolve each imbalance humor. Without access to medical doctors, people have relied on herbs, amulets, and invocations. There are roughly 250 plant species currently used in traditional Arabic medicine for treating various diseases. Figure 4 shows some Arab herbs in display [9]. Common Arab herbs include [10,11]:

- *Honey* is the best treatment for the gums and many diseases.
- *Garlic* is in many treatments, including urinary problems.
- *Juniper* or pine in a bath relieves allergic skin problems.
- *Oregano* is known for its antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties.
- *Cinnamon* is for wounds, tumors, and ulcers.
- Cannabis and opium: Doctors prescribed these, but only for therapeutic purposes, as they realized that they were powerful drugs.
- *Saffron* is a spice used widely as an herbal medicine, spice, food coloring, and a flavoring agent since ancient times.
- *Olive oil* is renowned for its healthy fatty acids, skin-softening, and heart-protective qualities.
- *Thyme* is an extremely popular herb used in food, wounds, and for treatment for respiratory, inflammatory, and digestive conditions.
- *Anise oil* helps with cough and flu cases and improves digestion, alleviates cramps, and reduces nausea.
- *Turmeric* contains the chemical curcumin that decreases inflammation in the body. The spice also functions as a very potent antioxidant.
- *Gum Arabic* has been used in herbal medicine since ancient times.

APPLICATIONS OF ARABIC TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Arabic traditional medicine has become a part of modern life in the Middle East, and it is acquiring worldwide respect. TAIM therapies have shown remarkable success in healing acute as well as chronic diseases and have been utilized by people in most countries of the Mediterranean who have faith in spiritual healers. The following examples are diseases that TAIM can cure.

- *Cancer*: Cancer is a leading cause of death worldwide. The incidence of cancer is increasing in both developed countries and developing

nations. Cancer is due to abnormalities in the DNA of the affected cells leading to an extra mass of tissue called a tumor. There are several Islamic and Arabic herbs used for treating cancer. Each plant has been investigated for its anticancer potential [12].

- *COVID-19*: There have been several declarations on the use of herbal-based traditional medicine for the prevention or definitive diagnosis of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). Many of the claims are difficult to verify because of the lack of documented evidence showing that these remedies prevent suffering from COVID-19. As the pandemic continues to spread, there are increasing messages promoting the use of herbal-based traditional medicines for COVID-19. Currently, no herbal remedy has been validated for use to prevent or treat COVID19 [13].

BENEFITS

Herbal treatments are the most commonly utilized form of traditional medicine.

Herbal remedies carry an emotional message of cultural empowerment. Arabic medicine has made a major contribution to the development of pharmacy. Many of the herbs have been tested in clinical studies within the Arab communities. Global use of Arabic traditional medicine has continued to gain momentum.

CHALLENGES

When traditional physicians do not know how to cure a disease, they often turn to superstitious rites and magic. There has been a decline in the great knowledge and use of herbs in the Arab world, mostly as a result of the increased availability of modern medicine. Due to urbanization changes in lifestyles in the Middle East, the knowledge of the uses of Medicinal plants for healing purposes has been lost. Another serious issue is that many herbs used in Arabic traditional medicine are now rare. Medicinal plants in the Middle Eastern region and worldwide are becoming increasingly rare due to the ongoing destruction of their natural habitat and environmental changes.

Since Arabic is the *lingua franca* of the Islamic world, some traditional medicines used to be in Arabic and that prevented their global adoption. There is increasing concern about the safety of medicinal plants. Many medicinal herbs are therapeutic at one dose and toxic at another. The exact dose of traditional medicine is often variable or unknown. There are no governmental regulations on the manufacture, purity, or labeling claims of herbal remedies. Several cases of contamination and poisons

were detected in vegetables and plant in Arab world such as Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Jordan, UAE, Pakistan, and Yemen in the recent years [14].

CONCLUSION

Arabic-speaking world provided the early foundations of the medical art in the Islamic world. In recent times, traditional medicine has become the interest of the global researchers. There is a growing body of knowledge on the role of various dietary plants in reducing disease. The Arab world has known how to use natural remedies for centuries.

The knowledge of herbal remedies in Arabic (Islamic) medicine is vast.

As the use of traditional medicine continues to gain momentum around the world, it is increasingly being used in nations where allopathic medicine is predominant in the healthcare system. Arabic-speaking world provided the early foundations of the medical art in the Islamic world. More information about Persian traditional medicine can be found in the books in [15-21] and related journals:

- Journal of Integrative Medicine
- Journal of Medicinal Plants Research
- Current Traditional Medicine
- Traditional Medicine Research
- Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine
- Traditional and Integrative Medicine

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Figure I Special tools used by medieval surgeons [3].



Figure 2 Potions produced by wise women [3].

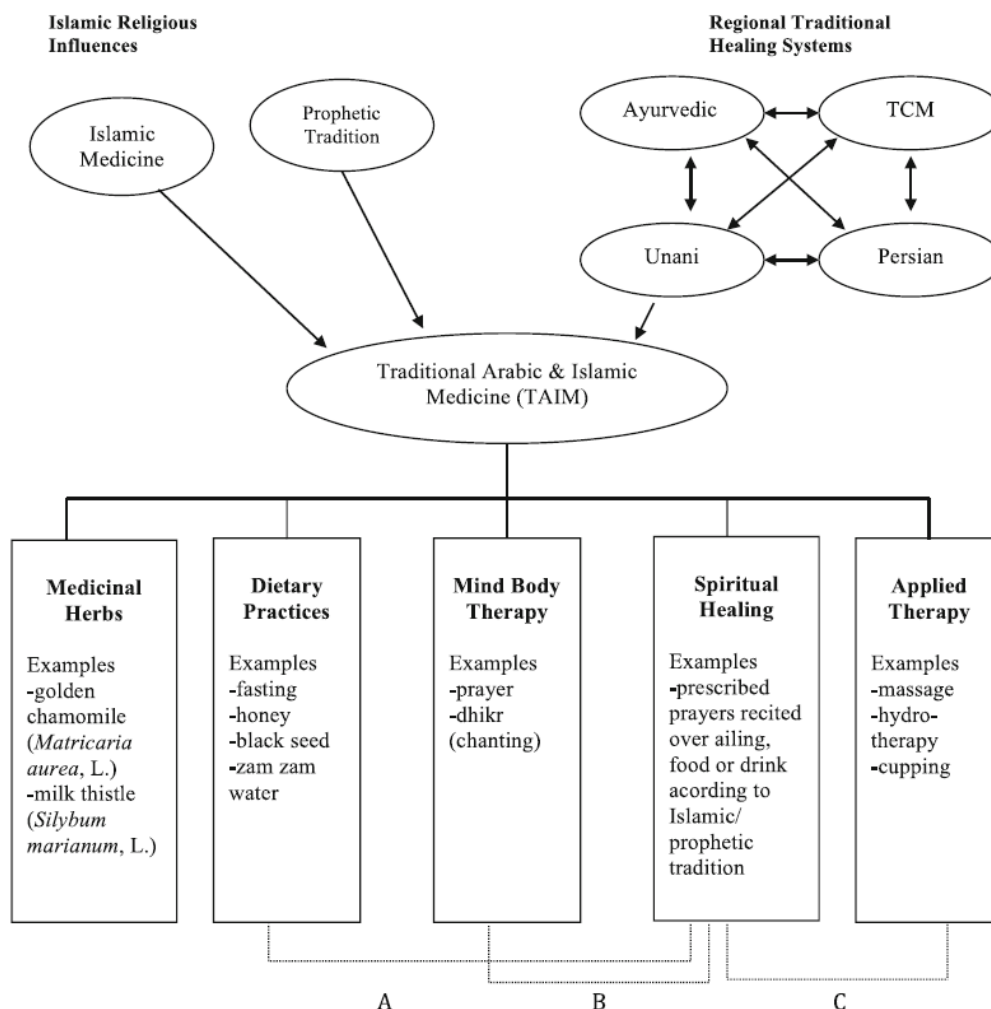


Figure 3 A unifying conceptual model of traditional Arabic & Islamic medicine (TAIM) [3].



Figure 4 Some Arab herds in display [9].