

## Rhazes' concepts on medical ethics

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### Competing interests

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### Abstract

Ethics in any industry and profession, especially in medicine, is a matter of great concern and debatable. Ancient Persian Muslim doctors also did not neglect this issue, as they mentioned some points regarding the observance of medical ethics in most of their books. Rhazes' "*Akhlaq al-Tabib*" treatise is one of the most important manuscripts on medical ethics. Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyya Razi, known in the west as Rhazes, was a great Persian scientist and physician who lived in the 9th and 10th centuries AD. In the "*Akhlaq al-Tabib*" treatise, he wrote a collection of his guidelines and ideas about medical ethics. In this manuscript, Rhazes first mentioned the ethical qualities that the physician must admire, and then pointed out the ethical standards regarding treatment and patient's rights. The study found that the principles of tenth-century medical ethics are very similar to what is being said today.

**Keywords:** *Akhlaq al-Tabib*; Rhazes; legal medicine; medical ethics; Persian medicine

## Introduction

The scope of legal medicine is too broad to allow the development of a determinate definition. In summary, legal medicine represents medical knowledge's impact on the interface of medicine and law. It is relevant to the delivery of health care to patients. It provides the filter that decides what is acceptable when applying community standards in such areas as patient rights, ethics, research, quality assurance, risk management or malpractice [1].

Ethics is the application of values and moral rules to human activities. Bioethics is a part of applied ethics that uses ethical principles and decision-making for solving actual or anticipated dilemmas in medicine and biology [2]. Ethics in every industry and profession is a matter of great importance and debatable. In medicine, morality is more important, and there are more discussions and laws in this field than in other professions. Based on the viewpoint of Islam, human beings are full-fledged. Since the physician is responsible for maintaining the health of the human mind and body, it is necessary to avoid the loss of patient's rights by maintaining ethical principles in the medical profession [3]. Medical ethics has long been considered in various civilizations. For example, in the 4th century BC, prohibits physicians from doing what is harmful to the patient and focuses on the integrity of the professional, benevolence and human dignity in the practice of medicine [4].

Persian medicine as a kind of alternative medicine has a history as old as 8,000 years also the relationship between medicine and medical ethics among Iranians has a long history, as ancient Persian medicine had an inseparable connection with Zoroastrianism and Avesta's teachings. Also, paying attention to the patient's mental state and establishing a correct relationship with him is one of the six principles of maintaining health from Avicenna, the famous Persian physician [5]. According to the principles of this religion, the observance of good thought and good deeds in the field of treatment is ordered. The issue of patient's rights in ancient Persian medicine was of special interest and the physician had to diagnose the disease accurately, follow the patient and get to the patient's bedside on time. Performing moral offenses such as abortion were also considered guilty [6].

Persian Muslim doctors also did not neglect this issue, as they mentioned some points regarding the observance of Islamic and medical ethics in most of their books.

In Islam, the physician is responsible for the patient and the holy Prophet said: "A person who provides medicine without knowledge, is responsible."

Persian doctors believed that a medical student before entering this field should be skilled in 10 sciences as a prerequisite, including ethics [6, 7]. For example, Hakim Aghili Khorasani, in the introduction to his book, *Kholasat al-Hikmah*, listed twenty-two conditions as the ethics of the physician and five conditions as the patients' morals and etiquettes [8]. Persian scholars also wrote a lot of books particularly on medical ethics. The book of *Adab al-Tabib*, by *Al-Rawahi* and *Al-adab al-Tebiyah fi al-Islam* by *Muhammad Ja'far al-Ameli* are among them. Rhazes' "Akhlaq al-Tabib" manuscript is one of them which specifically devoted to medical ethics [8, 9]. The present article tries to introduce this manuscript and summarizes the guidelines of Rhazes on medical ethics and legal medicine.

## Materials and methods

The traditional concepts on medical ethics in the Persian medieval era investigated in this paper are based on Rhazes' special treatise named "Akhlaq al-Tabib". Also, some articles about the history of medical ethics in Persian medicine, modern ethical theories and legal medicine were searched in google scholar and pubmed. Finally, Rhazes' views in "Akhlaq al-Tabib" were analyzed and compared with some modern theories of medical ethics.

## Results

### A brief introduction to Rhazes

Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyya Razi, known in the west as Rhazes (865-925 AD), was one of the greatest Persian physicians to influence the development of medical sciences [10]. Rhazes studied in various fields of science, including philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, chemistry and medicine, and has written more than 200 treatises and books [11]. He treated many patients during his life and presented his scientific experiences and clinical observations to others in his books as a case report. This great scientist studied the knowledge of many civilizations including Persian, Hindi, Arabic, and Greek. He founded a large hospital in Baghdad and designed a curriculum as part of a periodic training course for physicians at different levels. In addition to scientific discussions, he also taught his students the ethics of medicine [12, 13].

Edward Fayer, in the book of "*Navabeq olama al-kimia*" has expressed some interesting points about Rhazes' ethical qualities. He introduced Rhazes as an advocator of poor patients who blame doctors who endanger the health of patients due to lack of financial support [13].

Among the Rhazes' books, "*Tib e roohani*" book and "*Akhlaq al-Tabib*" treatise are specifically about ethics. In the book of "*Tib e roohani*" (Spiritual medicine), Rhazes praised the intellect, suppressed the passion and noted the adverse effects of bad morals such as arrogance, jealousy and anger. However, he has also mentioned the principles of medical ethics in most of his other books, such as *al-Hawaii* and *Sir al-Tib* [6].

### Rhazes' Akhlaq al-Tabib treatise

"*Akhlaq al-Tabib*" treatise is one of the manuscripts he has written on this subject. Rhazes wrote this treatise to his pupil Abu Bakr ibn Qareb – the special physician of one of the Persian kings. Although many of the guidelines in this manuscript relate to the ethics of practice for kings, there are, however, important points for all physicians [14, 15].

The field of medical ethics covers a wide range of ethical issues, including medical ethics in professional communication between patient and physician, how to deal with psychiatric patients, ethics in testing treatments and end-of-life care [9]. Of course, the "*Akhlaq al-Tabib*" treatise focuses on medical ethics in professional communication between patient and physician. Rhazes has detailed medical ethics, both in terms of patients' rights and the rights of a physician, which is summarized in the following [16, 17].

### Ethical rules concerning patients' rights

**The same attitude towards all patients** Rhazes said that the physician should always order the patient and his attitude should be the same for patients at every level and position. The doctor should not be under the control of patients. So, from Rhazes' point of view, it is difficult to practice for kings and high-ranking people who are not easily commanded.

**Continuous study to keep the knowledge up to date** This expert physician recommended that doctors should study medical books continuously and try to gain experience, so he believed that any engagement that prevents the physician from doing so should be prohibited.

**Secrecy** Rhazes said: "The doctor is aware of the secrets of people and should be very secretive. It's possible that a patient conceals a secret from his/her closest relatives, but tells it to the doctor."

**Respecting the privacy of patients** Rhazes believed that the doctor should avoid sensuality in dealing with patients. He has quoted from Galen: "The wise physician should do his job only for the satisfaction of God and close his eyes on looking at the patient's private organs. If the examination of the patient's private organs was necessary, the physician should only look at the examination site and avoid ogling."

**Avoiding arrogance** This authoritative scholar said that some doctors are arrogant because of their recall by high-ranking people or the success of a cure for a serious illness, which is a very unpleasant trait.

**Paying attention to the poor** Rhazes quoted from Galen: "It is worthy of the physician to behave equally in curing the rich and the poor."

**Trusting in God** Rhazes advised the physician to trust in God and emphasized that every success achieved in the treatment of patients is with God's help.

**Family physician principle** This precious physician believed that a health record should be made for individuals covered by a family doctor. If someone becomes ill, the study of this health record will help the physician treat the disease.

**Modifying the patient's nutrition** Rhazes advised that if the patient has an appetite for harmful food, the physician should not stop it suddenly. He/she should gradually involve beneficial foods in the patient's diet.

**Talking to the patient directly** Rhazes said that it is better for patient to talk to the doctor without a mediator during a visit, so that he/she can easily report his problems to the doctor. Also, sometimes the physician has to prescribe something for the patient which the patient does not consent others to know.

**Avoid drinking alcohol** Rhazes prohibited the doctor from drinking alcohol, because in the drunken state, the doctor would be humbled by the patient and the probability of an error in treatment would also be greatly increased.

**The physician availability** Patients should have access to the doctor to reduce the risk of medication errors and to report the possible side effects of drugs.

**Regular follow-up of the patient** Rhazes quoted from Hippocrates: "Life is short, work is lengthy and time is tight." By reminding this point, he drew the physician's attention to the regular assessment of the patient's condition during treatment, in order to avoid medical error.

**Carrying out clinical trials before prescribing a drug** Rhazes warned the doctors about prescribing untested medications on the patients.

**Gentle behavior with the patient** Rhazes advised the physician to speak with the patient kindly and away from annoying words. In this regard, Allameh Hassanzadeh Amoli, the great contemporary Persian scientist, believes that the physician's attitude, mood and behavior are effective in the treatment of the patient [18].

**Avoiding magic and non-scientific works** This venerable scholar said that the physician should avoid what is not in medical sciences and the work of priests and witches. He/she must inform people of the deception of those who try to mislead them, and remind patients that magic does not exist in medicine [11, 17].

#### Ethical rules concerning physician's rights

**Probability of error by the doctor** Rhazes stressed that human being is not perfect, and the doctor is not excluded from that. He said that sometimes some people think that if one is superior to others in a branch of science, he/she must inevitably be able to answer every question and issue in that field and has no right to make a mistake. At the same time a professor may sometimes be unable to solve a problem that their student is capable of solving.

**No unreasonable blame for the doctor** In fact, some diseases are rapidly curable, others take longer to treat and some are incurable. In most cases, the physician is blamed for treating a disease due to the length of treatment or disability to treat incurable diseases. Rhazes considered the ignorance of people as a cause of these blames and reminded doctors that they should not be upset by these blames.

**Good attitude towards the doctor** Rhazes said: "Behave well with your doctor, before you need him/her. It's not much better for a patient than the doctor loves him/her". In fact, few people in the patient's relatives are as pleased with the patient's recovery as the physician.

**Following the doctor's prescriptions carefully** Rhazes warned the patient if he/she failed to execute the prescriptions of the physician, lest it be hidden from the doctor due to shame, because if the doctor does not know about it, treatment may be difficult.

**Avoiding referral to non-specialist people for health care** Rhazes advised people to avoid deceitful people who are involved in the treatment of patients without knowledge. Rhazes believed that thieves and bandits are better than those who claim to be physician without

knowledge because thieves rob people's property, but medical claimants endanger human lives. He also said that it's better for people to be left to their own nature and never be treated than being treated by such persons. In this regard, "Abolhassan Ali ibn Raban Tabari", another Persian scholar, said: "The ignorant doctor is the cause of patient's death" [15, 17].

#### Special traits of doctors:

In another part of this treatise, Rhazes mentioned five special attributes of doctors:

(1) All nations and cultures agree that medical care is one of the best jobs.

(2) All people, including senior ones and kings, need doctors.

(3) Doctors work for patients who are away from them, like those near them.

(4) Doctors always want to make others happy and comfortable.

(5) In Arabic, the word of "Tabib" (= physician) is derived from one of the names of God [15].

#### Discussion

Medical ethics and patient rights are very important in medical discussions today. Therefore, physicians must learn medical ethics well [2].

Although medical ethics has a good place in the medical community today, but this issue has also been considered by some physicians in traditional medicine.

Based on the existing literature, ethics has always been of great interest to Persian physicians since far away, and after the advent of Islamic civilization in Iran, the importance of respecting the rights of patients has been considered more than ever.

Rhazes was one of the most prominent medical scientists of the medieval era. He was appointed director of a large hospital in Baghdad, in 907. In addition to treatment he devised a system of medical education and committed to medical ethics and humanities. In total he wrote over 200 books and some of his manuscripts are about the philosophy and rules of medicine ethics. It manifests Rhazes' great scientific personality in medical history and his role in the development of medicine [6, 8].

Medical ethics can be divided into several sections: observance of ethical standards by the physician, observance of moral standards in medical care, and observance of ethical rules in medical researches. In this treatise, Rhazes has implied the first two cases due to his specific circumstances and audience, and the observance of ethics in research has been mentioned in his other works. For example, the principles of observing justice, paying attention to the nutrition of patients, secrecy and avoiding non-scientific matters are among the motives of health care, while the principles of avoiding arrogance, trusting in God, and avoiding alcoholic beverages are related to moral affairs of doctors [15].

Today, the common framework for analyzing medical ethics is the application of the "Principles of Four", adopted by Tom Beauchamp and Childress James Childers in their book, *The Laws of Medical Biomedical Ethics*. This method identifies four primary and simple ethical principles that are judged and interacted with each other, and also attracts the individual's attention to the extent and scope of their application. These four principles are:

(1) Respect for autonomy and individual independence. That is, the patient has the right to choose or refuse treatment.

(2) Beneficence. That is, the person working in this area should act in the interests of the patient and his/her benefit.

(3) Non-maleficence. That is, avoid doing anything which could harm the patient.

(4) Observance of justice in treating patients [18].

Other criteria that are sometimes discussed include:

(1) The principle of mutual respect between the patient and the doctor.

(2) The principle of truthfulness and honesty and the concept of informed consent [19].

Rhazes mentioned the 5 special features of the medical profession in the book *Akhlaq al-Tabib*. He also explained sixteen patient's rights to the doctor, as well as five doctor's rights for the patient. The rights that Rhazes stated helped to establish the correct relationship between patient and doctor and to achieve the best treatment outcome [15].

Comparing the principles of medical ethics posed by Tom Biochamp and James Childers to the principles of medical ethics expressed by Rhazes, it seems that while paying attention to the most of aforementioned six principles (e.g. same attitude towards all patients, respect for the patient and gentle attitude towards them, an effort to provide non-harmful and beneficial treatment by updating the knowledge and regular assessment of patient conditions, etc.), Rhazes has explained more varied and practical ethics about the rights of physicians and patients [15, 18, 19].

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