Abul-Hasan al-Tabari: A Review of his Views and Works

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Abstract

Abul-Hasan al-Tabari was a 10th century Persian physician born in Tabaristan. He was a creative and innovative physician who avoided emulating treatments without investigating and examining them. Tabari was an encyclopedist and had a holistic view to medicine. Investigation of the views of this great Persian scholar indicates that his scientific and moral characteristics contain: paying adequate attention to philosophy and medical ethics, citing other scholars’ works, attention to the necessity of clinical and hospital training, emphasizing indigenous therapy and scientific and responsible treatment with medical faults and discovery of Sarcoptes scabiei. Tabari has written valuable articles on different medical sciences; however, he is especially famous for authoring the Al-Mualajat al-Buqratiya (Hippocratic Treatments)-an important medical encyclopedia. Several of Al-Tabari’s succeeding scholars and physician have referred to the Al-Mualajat al-Buqratiya in their medical articles. The aim of this study is further introduction of this great physician and assessment of his theories and key works.

Keywords: Al-Mualajat al-Buqratiya, clinical training, medical ethics Tabari, Sarcoptes scabiei.


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ones mentioning diseases and their treatments completely and including many chapters.”

2- Risala fi Zikr al-Qârura ( A book on urology)
In his time, Tabari found no other book on urology, except two al-Tafsira and al-Bayan by Ayûb Rahavi. According to Tabari, since the two had many shortcomings, he was motivated to author the detailed book al-Qârura.

3- Kitâb ‘Alâj al-Âtfâl ( The book of children’s diseases)
He had novel views on the specialization of pediatric diseases. In the introduction of ‘Alâj al-Âtfâl, he writes, “I decided to write in particular about treating children and this is what has not been done so far completely and technically by any of my ancestors”. Discusses children’s diseases in detail and sixty terms including pediatric hematuria, pediatric convulsions, pediatric gastro-intestinal cancer, kidney/bladder stones and much more.

4- Maqâla fi Tib al-‘Ain (A paper on Ophthalmology)
A copy of Tabari’s text Maqâla fi Tib al-‘Ain exists in Aleppo library in Syria.

5- Kitâb al-‘Ain fi al-Mu’âlajat ( The book on Ophthalmology treatments)
Tabari has authored an enormous treatise on ophthalmology alone, declaring, “I have authored a distinct book completely and exclusively on ophthalmology in which I have mentioned all ocular diseases including important and unimportant, each for each temper”. Unfortunately, this book is lost.

6- Al-Kitâb al-Kabîr ( The complete book on medicine)
In al-Mu’âlajat Tabari declares that he has written the book after his al-Kitâb al-Kabîr.

7- Al- Darâbadîn (The book on pharmaceutics)
This book is specific to pharmaceutics and compound medicines, which is lost unfortunately, and only some portions cited in al-Mu’âlajat are available.

8- Kitâb al-Fasd ( The book on phlebotomy)
Phlebotomy is one of the methods used in treating diseases in Iranian traditional medicine alongside the major therapeutic techniques like food-therapy. Observing Jorjân physicians’ inaccurate method and their phlebotomies which they carry out without any understanding and knowledge, Tabari was moved to author an exclusive paper as Kitâb al-Fasd.

Tabari’s Views on the Development of Medical Science

1- The Necessity of Learning Philosophy for Understanding Medicine
Although Tabari does not have a separate book on philosophy, he expands on this subject in fifty chapters, the topic of which is the physician’s familiarity with philosophy. Tabari believed that a distinctive knowledge of philosophy is necessary for a physician to grasp medical discussions accurately.

2- Extensive Studies and Referring to other Scholars’ Works
Tabari referred to many books and scholars and explained their theories with an approving or criticizing trend. Some scholars like Jurjis (the chief of Gondishapur Hospital 765 C.E.), Hunayn ibn Ishâq (a famous physician, and scientist 809–873 C.E.), and Dioscorides (a Roman physician pharmacologist and botanist 40-90 C.E.). A number of books like al-‘Ain by Amedì, Plato’s book al-Kayy, Rofs’ book al-Fasd, Hippocrates’s book Epidemia, abu Mâhir’s Tadbîr al-Musafir 13,14 and Galen’s book fi Elm al-Akhlaq (which is lost, though fortunately some parts of it have been maintained in al-Mu’âlajat) 14. In 1956, Stern extracted them from al-Mu’âlajat and printed them in a distinct book.

3- The Necessity of Clinical and Hospital Training
Al-Tabari has conducted clinical trials with his teacher Abû Mâhir Shirazi at Basra Hospital and gained extensive clinical experiences.13,14 In Al-Mu’âlajat Tabari writes: “I frequently observed that Abû Mâhir treated like this about the so-and-so disease or treated the ailments that are diagnosed difficulty by others.”14
He believed that a good physician must be a resident of the hospital, where patients come for treatment, and pursue their needs and conditions closely with a well-grounded professional, in their medical affairs and the physician must remember the subjects that he has studied before regarding these conditions and then his treatments will be right and useful for the patients.

4- Scientific and Responsible Treatment with Colleagues and Physicians’ Performances
Periodically, Tabari studied other physicians’ views and theories and criticized them.27 Sometimes, he rebuked his ignorant and non-expert contemporaries, yet approved and appreciated the proficient ones, such as a woman physician from Râmhormoz (city in southern Iran) named Bint Israel – who had collaborated with Tabari and completed the Mu’izz al-Daula treatment. Tabari had debates with Bint Israel and approved of her high scientific level of understanding.14 He also criticizes the physicians and people who misdiagnosis their patients; for example, he implies that a physician’s misdiagnosis of different kinds of inflammations and ordering inappropriate prescriptions may lead to the patient’s death. Also, in this same regard, he spoke of a pregnant woman who suffered from headaches, was misdiagnosed by her physician, and consequently aborted her baby, was complicated with a stroke and died.

5- Emphasizing Native Medications
Despite having adequate knowledge and understanding of treatments methods of other renowned physicians, he was also interested in the conventional native holistic treatments and the application of people’s experiences after ensuring their validity through clinical experiences. Tabari refers to many cases regarding this matter in his book.

Tabari and his Innovations
Tabari was a creative and innovative physician and avoided imitating his colleague’s treatments without examination and exploration. For example, he criticizes past physicians’ diagnosis of the
diseases *Bahaq* (a kind of skin disease) and *Baras* (Vitiligo) and explains that physicians in the past made no distinction between the treatment of these two diseases and medicated them in the same way.¹⁴

In 1382, Heydari-Jadid affirmed that Tabari is the true discoverer of scabies; Tabari was the first to recognize the insect in the lesions and to discover the effective medicines, prior to the discovery recorded by two Italian scholars Bonomo and Cestoni in 1687.¹⁷

Tabari’s additional research and innovations were oculotreatment. Abul Hasan had been highly skillful in treating ocular diseases and he devoted the fourth article of *Mu‘alajat* “on ocular diseases and their categories, benefits, creation, and treatments” to these problems in 54 chapters. In this part of his text, he describes two types of *Ramad* (Conjunctivitis), none of which has been mentioned by his preceding physicians. Additionally, regarding a number of physicians’ misdiagnosis and carelessness in their distinctive diagnosis, he states, “some physicians have mistakenly considered the eye ache from food not reaching the retina, vitreous humor, and lens as a type of brain disease.”¹⁴

Tabari and Medical Ethics

Tabari made extensive studies on vocational morality and medical morality. In chapter 35 of the first article of *Mu‘alajat*, he begins with, “Principles with which a physician is required to comply in religion, morality, courtesy etc.” There are approximately ninety moral points on the interaction between the physician and patient mentioned in this chapter.²⁵

References