

MEDICAL ETHICS AND PHYSICIAN MORALITY IN THE TEACHINGS OF IBN SINA (AVICENNA)

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Abstract: *This article examines the philosophical, ethical, and practical aspects of medical ethics and physician morality in the teachings of the great scholar Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna). It highlights the spiritual qualities of the physician, the humanitarian approach toward patients, professional responsibility, and the moral foundation of medical science. The paper also analyzes the principles of honesty, conscience, confidentiality, and compassion in the doctor–patient relationship as discussed in Ibn Sina’s *The Canon of Medicine (Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb)*. Furthermore, the study explores the interconnection between his ethical-philosophical views and Islamic moral values, emphasizing the physician’s duty to society and commitment to the profession. The relevance of Ibn Sina’s teachings to contemporary medical practice is also discussed.*

Keywords: *Ibn Sina, medical ethics, physician morality, patient care, humanism, conscience, philosophy of medicine, responsibility, The Canon of Medicine, moral values.*

Introduction

Throughout human history, the development of medicine has gone hand in hand with the evolution of medical ethics. Every activity related to human life and health requires the highest degree of moral responsibility. The physician is not merely a healer of diseases but also a person who directly influences human destiny. Therefore, great scholars and healers of the past paid special attention to the moral character of physicians, viewing medicine not only as a scientific discipline but also as a moral and spiritual practice.

Among these scholars, Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna) occupies a unique place. His contributions to medical science are not limited to theoretical and practical achievements; they are deeply rooted in moral and philosophical reflection. For Ibn Sina, medicine was not only the science of physical health but also a means of achieving spiritual perfection. He integrated moral philosophy into the foundations of medical science and formulated one of the earliest theoretical frameworks of medical ethics.

His ethical reflections are found not only in *The Canon of Medicine* but also in philosophical works such as *The Book of the Soul (Kitab an-Nafs)*, *Pointers and Reminders (Al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat)*, *The Book of Healing (Kitab al-Shifa’)*, and *The*

Book of Knowledge (Danishnama-i 'Ala'i). In these, he discusses the physician's duty, conscience, compassion, confidentiality, devotion, and responsibility toward both the patient and society. His teachings not only shaped Islamic medicine in the Middle Ages but also continue to influence the evolution of modern medical ethics.

Main Part

The central principle of Ibn Sina's medical philosophy is the sanctity of human life and the recognition of health as the highest value. He believed that the goal of medicine is not merely to cure diseases but to bring a person into a state of physical, mental, and spiritual harmony. Hence, a true physician must be not only knowledgeable but also morally pure, conscientious, just, compassionate, discreet, honest, and devoted.

According to Ibn Sina, the medical profession is the most honorable of all because it deals directly with preserving human life, yet this honor brings with it a great moral responsibility. In the introduction to *The Canon of Medicine*, he writes:

“The physician is the helper of nature. He observes nature's work not to imitate it but to assist it.”

This statement illustrates that the physician's task is both scientific and ethical.

Ibn Sina's medical ethics rests on three fundamental principles:

1. The Sanctity of Human Life.

Ibn Sina regarded human life as a divine gift. Therefore, he maintained that “every soul has value, and the physician must act according to the will of God.” Any medical decision, he argued, must conform to moral principles. This idea anticipates the modern medical ethic of “preserving life.”

2. The Physician's Conscientious Duty and Responsibility toward Knowledge.

Ibn Sina warned: “An ignorant physician is one who plays with death.” For him, medical knowledge must always be combined with conscience and compassion. The physician should continually improve his knowledge and apply it for the benefit of humanity. A true healer, in his view, treats both the body and the soul.

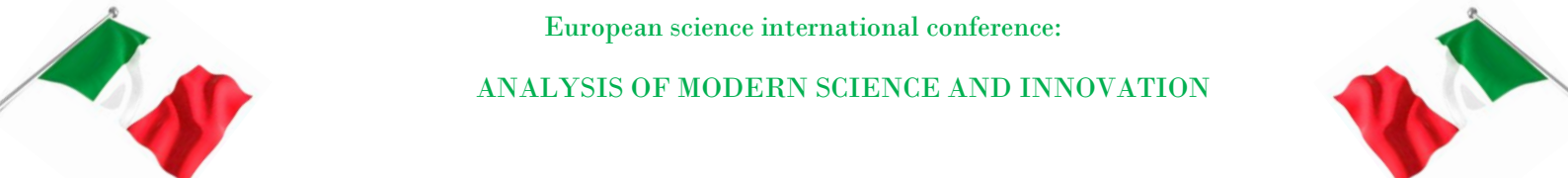
3. Moral Responsibility toward the Patient.

Ibn Sina emphasized trust, compassion, and honesty as the foundations of the doctor-patient relationship. He condemned physicians who were indifferent to patients' suffering, asserting that kindness is part of the healing process. Mental peace, he believed, plays a decisive role in recovery.

Confidentiality was another core principle:

“The physician must keep the patient's secrets, for the one who reveals them loses all trust.”

This directly corresponds to the modern ethical rule of medical confidentiality and informed consent.



Ibn Sina also viewed the physician as morally accountable to society. Since a healthy society depends on healthy individuals, the physician must act as a moral guide and social leader. He wrote:

“The physician is the light of people’s lives, the healer of their suffering, and the bringer of hope to their hearts.”

For Ibn Sina, medicine was inseparable from moral and spiritual values rooted in Islam — such as justice, sincerity, patience, mercy, and righteousness. He considered the physician’s intention to be crucial: if a physician acts for the sake of God’s approval, his healing will be blessed.

In *The Canon of Medicine*, Ibn Sina also discussed the connection between mental and physical health:

“In many cases, the cause of illness lies not in the body but in the soul. Without healing the soul, one cannot restore the body.” This insight represents one of the earliest expressions of psychosomatic medicine.

Furthermore, Ibn Sina insisted that medical practice must unite empirical knowledge with moral integrity. He warned against reckless experimentation and unethical ambition:

“Without the union of experience and morality, the physician’s hand brings not healing, but destruction.”

His ideas also extended to medical education. He argued that physicians must be trained in both science and ethics: “Scientific perfection must go hand in hand with moral perfection.”

The ethical values found in his writings — such as respect for life, informed consent, confidentiality, and non-maleficence — anticipated many of the modern principles of bioethics and medical deontology. Notably, *The Canon of Medicine* was used as a primary medical textbook in European universities for over six centuries. Ibn Sina’s ethics, harmonizing scientific rigor with spiritual depth, complemented the Hippocratic tradition but went further by emphasizing compassion and the moral development of the healer.

Conclusion

Ibn Sina’s doctrine of medical ethics and physician morality is built upon the principles of humanity, conscience, honesty, confidentiality, devotion, patience, compassion, knowledge, and responsibility. He viewed the physician as not merely a professional but a moral pillar of society. According to Ibn Sina, medical knowledge without moral virtue can harm rather than heal.

By integrating religious values, philosophical reflection, and scientific inquiry, Ibn Sina established a universal framework for medical ethics. His teachings remain highly relevant today: the principles of the sanctity of life, respect for patients, avoidance of

harm, conscientious decision-making, confidentiality, and responsible use of knowledge continue to form the foundation of modern medical ethics.

As Ibn Sina himself implied, the greatest reward for a physician is not wealth but the preservation of human life and the restoration of hope in the patient's heart. His legacy continues to guide healthcare professionals as a timeless code of conscience and compassion.

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