

IBN SINA (AVICENNA) – DOCTOR OF DOCTORS

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Ibn Sina was born in 980 C.E. in the village of Afshana near Bukhara which today is located in Uzbekistan. He turned his attention to Medicine at the age of 17 years and found it, in his own words, “not difficult”. By the age of 18 he had built up a reputation as a physician. Ibn Sina completed 99 books comprising 16 on medicine, 68 on theology and metaphysics, 11 on astronomy and 4 on verse. Among his scientific works, the leading two are the Kitab al-Shifa (Book of Healing), a philosophical encyclopaedia based upon Aristotelian traditions and the al-Qanun al-Tibb which represents the final categorisation of Greco-Arabian thoughts on Medicine. The Qanun is of course, by far the largest, most famous and most important of Ibn Sina’s works. The work contains about one million words and like most Arabic books is elaborately divided and subdivided. The main division is into five books, of which the first deals with general principles; the second with simple drugs arranged alphabetically; the third with diseases of particular organs and members of the body from the head to the foot; the fourth with diseases which though local in their inception spread to other parts of the body such as fevers and the fifth with compound medicines.

The Qanun distinguishes mediastinitis from pleurisy and recognises the contagious nature of phthisis (tuberculosis of the lung) and the spread of disease by water and soil. It gives a scientific diagnosis of ankylostomiasis and attributes the condition to an intestinal worm. The Qanun points out the importance of dietetics, the influence of climate and environment on health and the surgical use of oral anaesthetics. The Qanun’s materia medica considers some 760 drugs, with comments on their application and effectiveness. He recommended the testing of a new drug on animals and humans prior to general use. Ibn Sina noted the close relationship between emotions and the physical condition and felt that music had a definite physical and psychological effect on patients. The great doctor had a simple remedy: unite the sufferer with the beloved.

The Arabic text of the Qanun was published in Rome in 1593 and was therefore one of the earliest Arabic books to see print. It was translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona in the 12th century. From the 12th – 17th century, the Qanun served as the chief guide to Medical Science in the West and is said to have influenced Leonardo da Vinci. In the words of Dr. William Osler, the Qanun has remained “a medical bible for a longer time than any other work”. In the museum at Bukhara, there are displays showing many of his writings, surgical instruments from the period and paintings of patients undergoing treatment. An impressive monument to the life and works of the man who became known as the “doctor of doctors” still stands outside Bukhara museum and his portrait hangs in the Hall of the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Paris.