

AVICENNA (980-1037)

Avicenna's Poem on Medicine, transl. H.C. Krueger, Springfield 1963, pp. 14-57

Preface in Verse

Praise be to Allah, the Teacher, the Unique, Majesty of the Heavens, the Exalted, the Glorious. Glory be to Him, the Eternal Being who drew forth creatures from Nothingness. He floods our minds with light to the point of having revealed to them that which was hidden. In His goodness, He created man and gave him judgment and speech as privileges. He allowed him access to knowledge through the perceptions of his senses and, through reasoning, opened to him the invisible world. The mind of man is bound to a living soul of which the existence is proved beyond all doubt. Allah distributed judgment and senses among all men at the same time as life. But each one has his own character and in that His Marvellous Wisdom shines forth. Thus, whoever has banished Ugliness from his soul has been able to acquire Virtue. The arts and speech distinguish man from animal. The best of men do good by accompanying it with courteous words, preoccupying themselves with the body, granting to it its rightful mirth. Poets are the princes of the Word; physicians rule over the body. The eloquence of the former rejoices the soul; the devotion of the latter cures illnesses. In this poem is included all Theoretical and Practical Medicine. And here I am, putting into verse all I know of this science.

On the definition of the word "Medicine"

Medicine is the preservation of health and the cure of disease which arises from conscious causes which exist within the body.

Subdivision of Medicine

A first division will be: Theory and Practice. Theory within itself is divided into three sections. There are seven natural components and six vital factors. Indeed, they are found in books. They are the diseases, the symptoms and the causes. Practice is divided into two actions: one performed with the hands, the other with medicine and dietary regimens. [...]

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Chapter I

On the Conservation of Health Through Diets and Drugs

The preservation of health can be extended to such persons who are completely healthy. For the one with imperfect health, there are two cases to face: the one is that in which the patient is afflicted throughout his whole organism at all times, such as the old man, the convalescent, the young infant, and the one in whom you discover signs causing a fear of the illness. The other is the one of the patient whose affliction is localized in the skin, the flesh or the bones. [...]

Hygiene of the healthy man in harmony with the atmosphere, particularly in summer

To preserve health, there are two practices in medicine. If you have to maintain the temperament of someone in good condition, give him a suitable diet. If you decide to transform an organism from his natural state, give him that which is contrary to his temperament. Regarding this healthy man, control him, in general, in a way to maintain him in this good condition. Advise him to live in countries of the forth climate, those in which the air is healthy, a place above the desert, facing the east; the air is lighter there. For the summer, choose mountains and countries open to the north. For the night, occupy the upper floors and during the day, the lower floors. Avoid wool and cotton clothes, choose light flax, use cold aromatic substances such as rose oil; protect your eyes from the dust, keep from breathing smoke, the unhealthy vapors, avoid the sun's direct rays, the simoon, and the intense heat of the day. Do not read fine letters very long, nor small inscriptions nor difficult writings.

On the dietary regimen in general

It is proper to eat at least once in the space of a day and night, at most twice, the average being three times in two days. It is necessary to chew well to obtain good digestion; everything which is hard to chew is hard to digest. When you eat an indigestible food, wisely take something to neutralize it, its opposite, considering its temperament. [...]

On the beverage

If you wish to avoid illness, divide your nourishment into three parts: a third for respiration, a third for food and the rest for water. A little cold water quenches thirst, better than far too

much warm water. Too much ice in the beverage is harmful to the nerves; allow it only for the obese and sanguine man with strong tissues. It is not necessary to drink at the table except with the threat of choking and never after the meal, nor after a warm bath, nor after a violent exercise, nor after sexual intercourse– that can be dangerous. If it is necessary and you can control yourself, drink moderately. [...]

On sleep

Do not sleep too– it is detrimental for the mind! Do not stay awake too long for your senses will be weakened. It is proper to prolong sleep after a meal difficult to digest or after one of indigestion. Do not sleep too much when you are hungry– the vapors springing fourth from the humors will ascend to the brain. After the meal, sleep with the head elevated so that your food will take its proper place of digestion.

On physical exercise

Do not give up hard exercise; do not seek rest too long; preserve a happy medium. Exercise your limbs to help them repel the bad humors by walking and struggling until you succeed in panting. The thin man ought to avoid exercises in order not to increase his exhaustion. Do just the opposite for the fat man and make him wear a girdle if he has a fat abdomen. In summer, decrease fatigue for perspiration is exhaustion.