

MEDICINE IN PERSIA *



IF the medical historian could have access to the present day medical books in Persia, together with some of their older works which are to be found here and there, he ought to get much light on the old Arabic medicine and the beginnings of our own medical history. The Persians still cling to their own Arabic books. It seems to be a common idea among them that those of the older generations were the better physicians and that change is to be decried. Plato is their ideal practitioner than whom the world has seen no better, except Jesus. They tell the story that Plato, who, they say, lived in the time of Christ, travelled to Palestine to observe his works, and confessed that Jesus must be a prophet with superhuman power because his miracles were so far beyond anything that he (Plato) could do. Another story told about Plato is that he became so proficient that by feeling the pulse he could make the necessary diagnosis and prescribe treatment. In fact, he became so proficient that in an emergency they tied a string about the patient's wrist and carried the other end to the doctor! With such ideas current, the modern Western physician who uses a watch to count the pulse and begins to ask various questions, is put down by many of the ignorant as of doubtful ability or excessively peculiar.

The Persian still considers fire, water and air the physical elements, and that the health of the body depends upon four humours—blood, bile, mucus and the splenic fluid. Biliousness is due to excess of gall; eczema and various skin disorders to splenic disorder; asthma, dyspnoea, etc., to excess of mucus, while the idea of excess of blood leads to frequent bleedings. In fact, many people are bled annually as a health precau-

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tion, just as we used to take sulphur and molasses in the spring.

Constitutions, diets, diseases and drugs are classed as hot and cold. A man with a hot constitution should take cold foods, with a hot disease cold drugs, and *vice versa*. One of the common questions asked a doctor is, "What is my constitution?" So filled are the people with these ideas that they think if they can be certain of their own constitution they can look after their own health and often come to the doctor in surprise that after elaborate dietary precautions they are still ill.

A common supposed cause of disease is the presence of "wind," doubtless the "pneuma" of the ancients. This by moving about causes the various pains we roughly speak of as rheumatic, and collecting in certain spots causes various swellings. A diagnosis between "wind" and a genuine tumour is a source of perplexity to the Persian mind. "Dampness" plays a similar though less definite rôle. Both of these conditions, however, do not depend solely upon climatic conditions, but may come from eating various foods, squash and turnips being full of "wind," as are also certain kinds of rice, while cucumbers are "damp."

Turning from natural causes of disease, we find that jinns—the genii of the Arabian Nights—are commonly supposed to bring about many illnesses. They do not move about in the day time, but it is very dangerous for a man to go abroad at night or to do certain things which offend jinns. The "evil eye" is yet another source of danger. Wounded patients object to having strangers in the room lest one of them have an evil eye. To ward off these influences, charms and prayers are commonly worn by all classes, and frequently special prayers are written in a bowl and the ink then washed off to be used as a medicine for the patients.

Various other superstitions are also current in local places, as that of a snake in a man's stomach. The snake wishes to pay a visit to the king of snakes, whose residence is near a certain shrine. He takes up his abode in a victim's stomach and will not leave this abode until the patient goes on a pilgrimage to the shrine.

There are many different classes of practitioners, and as a rule the patient first tries many simple home remedies or gets the advice of his neighbours, "the experience of the people and women." Before doing anything the typical Persian cuts the Koran—i.e., he opens his Koran at random and reads the seventh line from the top of the page. If it is of favourable import, he does what he has in mind. If not, he tries something else. This proceeding is followed with the various remedies suggested, with the choice of the physician and generally before taking the medicine which the doctor has prescribed. If the doctor's remedies are not immediately efficacious, the patient or his friends will cut the Koran as to another doctor and start over again. This makes it very difficult to follow up one's cases or check results.

The most respectable practitioners are the physicians who follow the Arabic system of medicine as it has been handed down. They acquire their education through apprenticeship to older doctors. A few of them have adopted some of the western drugs which have recently been introduced, but their great standbys are herbs of all kinds. Probably the most common are violet flowers, sarsaparilla, ginseng (known as "chini"), and one called "cow's tongue." The first and last are considered almost harmless, something like tansy tea, but ginseng is considered a most powerful drug, dangerous to take unless one observes strict dietary rules over the course of forty days. In fact, in almost all conditions the doctor gives very careful dietary rules, and when blamed with failure to cure lays the fault at the patient's door by asserting that he must have violated some such rule. Some of the doctors are very sincere practitioners, but the custom of making contracts for the cure of the patients tempts them, especially those with little experience or prestige, into all sorts of tricks such as I have mentioned.

These physicians confine themselves largely if not entirely to internal medicine, and when they feel that the patient needs some of the simple procedures common in the country, call in a surgeon or barber to cut or bleed or leech the patient, as the case may be. The surgeon,

who is really a very inferior grade of doctor, also looks after abscesses, external sores, etc. For drainage in an abscess wound he commonly uses a bit of blue paper or bit of old rag, and seems to delight in keeping the wound open as long as possible. The cautery is sometimes used, ointments and poultices are common, and painful joints are frequently tatooed, as are also the temples in case of continued pain.

Another class are the eye doctors. They do nothing but eye work, and generally are itinerant, going about the country couching cataracts and giving the people various eye powders. Occasionally they are successful in fully displacing a lens but frequently only partially so. It would be hard to say how many eyes they permanently injure.

Still another group are the bonesetters. Some of their methods are very brutal and do actual injury, as in the case of a girl whose axilla contained a large hematoma due to torsion by a bonesetter.

The men who make more or less of a business of writing prayers and amulets are perhaps not to be classed as medical practitioners, but many of them enjoy great prestige. Certain shrines are also supposed to have miraculous healing powers, and people come from long distances to sleep within their doors. Vows, too, of all degrees, including long pilgrimages, are common.

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