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Medical Education in Arab Universities: A Time for Questions?

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التعليم الطبي في الجامعات العربية . . وقت للتأمل

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خلاصة : شهد العالم العربي زيادة مضطردة في عدد كليات الطب وخاصة في العشرين سنة الماضية . وأصبح عددها يفوق الخمسين كلية وهناك اجتهادات مختلفة في التعليم الطبي ، تبدأ الورقة بنبذة مختصرة عن تاريخ الطب في هذه المنطقة لتبرز وتذكر بأصالة الطب كمهنة إنسانية عبر التاريخ القديم والحديث . وتنتهي الورقة بطرح عدة تساؤلات حول التعليم الطبي ، نأمل أن تكون مجلتنا منبراً رائداً في المنطقة لتبادل الآراء ومن ثم جمعها لتصبح واحدة من الوثائق الهامة في التعليم الطبي خاصة ونحن على عتبة القرن الواحد والعشرين .

ABSTRACT: The medical education facilities in the Arab world are becoming – or perhaps already are - equivalent to those of the developed countries. More than 50 modern medical schools, designed on the western style and supported by state-of-the-art hospitals, provide high quality training for thousands of students each year. This is heartening, but in the process of imparting a westernized medical education, are we ignoring the rich Arab legacy in the field of medicine?

Historically, the Arab academic world has always placed the greatest importance on medical education. As far back as the Babylonian and Egyptian civilizations, medicine was taught through a well-formed apprenticeship process. It was considered a divine profession, practiced by priests and the elite. Rules and regulations were set to organize the practice of medicine (for example, Hammurabi's *Aubolisc* provided punishment to surgeons committing mistakes).

A further resurgence occurred during the initial period of Islam (from the time of Ummayad), when the Arabs started to gather more scientific knowledge. During the reign of Yazeid Bin Moawiah, the second Ummayad Caliph, they translated many science texts, including medicine, into Arabic.

In the medical field, they drew the maximum inspiration from the Greeks and the Persians. The Greeks, following the path led by Hippocrates, had transformed the practice of medicine into a formal and academic process. The Arabs assigned some of their best physicians and scientists, with linguistic ability, to translate the Greek books of Hippocrates and the Persian ones originating from the town of Jendisapur.

The Arab's quest for knowledge reached its zenith during the reign of Ma'amoon, the second son of Haroun Al Rashid. He established a special publishing and translation house, *"Bet Al-Hikma,"* the House of Wisdom. There, scientists from different disciplines, including medicine, were recruited to translate anything they could get hold of, and were rewarded generously; it is recorded that they were paid in gold equivalent to the weight of the book they translated.

In this golden period of Arabic-Islamic renaissance, delegations kept coming to Baghdad to learn science and medicine. European students were learning Arabic to be able to study in the Arab universities.

This period saw the emergence of many illustrious Arab physicians who made new physiological and medical discoveries such as Al Razi (Rhazus), Ibn Sina (Avicina), Ibn Al Nafees (who discovered pulmonary circulation 300 years before Harvey), and so on.

Medicine was learned as apprenticeship in hospitals, which were established in most major cities around the Empire, such as Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo. It was the duty of the most senior physician to teach and help his senior students and direct them to the best way of learning. They, in turn, taught their juniors, till it went down hierarchically to the most junior, in a manner educationalists today term the *fishpond strategy*. Assessment of practicing doctors was first known during the reigns of Abased and Ma'amoon. In fact, Ma'amoon ordered his chief physician to standardize the practice of medicine. The physician decreed that an assessment committee should clear anyone who practiced the profession or dealt with patients in any way. It is mentioned that only 800 physicians passed that assessment in Baghdad.

Parallel to what was going on in the Eastern part of

the Islamic empire, there was a similar movement in the western wing (Andalusia in Spain), where there were many famous physicians and surgeons who excelled during that time. Al Zahrawi was one of the most renowned of the surgeons. He wrote several books on surgery, illustrated with the pictures of his surgical instruments. That book was translated into many European languages including English, and the Royal College of Surgeons made use of it till the end of the 19th century.

Subsequently, the Arab world entered a period of hibernation. Except for some relatively short periods of wakefulness, the practice of medicine passed into the hands of charlatans and those who claimed to have divine powers. Hospitals, which had been erected in different parts of the Empire, fell into ruin.

During the Ottoman Empire, there was once again a resurgence of scientific methodology. A medical school was established in Istanbul. Many of the doctors who subsequently practiced in the Arab countries were its graduates. Hospitals were re-established in many major cities such as Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad.

Late in the 19th century, the first medical school in the modern times was established in Beirut, the American University of Beirut (AUB), followed shortly by a University at Cairo. Baghdad medical school was founded in 1921.

Except for AUB, the other medical schools were founded by a group of British physicians who were serving with the British armies occupying different parts of the Arab countries.

They were helped by a small group of local Arab physicians who were full of enthusiasm to have their own medical schools. Many other countries followed suit including Syria and Sudan.

Modern medical schools were founded in 1973 in Jordan and Kuwait. The other Gulf States followed suit. In 1982, the Arabian Gulf University (with School) was established. The UAE University School was inaugurated in 1984, and Sultan University Medical College in 1986. At present at least 50 medical colleges in the Arab world.

At this juncture, in order to make the education more relevant to the people, I th important to ask ourselves the following questi

1. Is there an agreed Arabic philosophy in ou education?
2. If not, do we need one?
3. Is our practice of medicine different from t the world, and if so, to what extent and in wh
4. What are our needs for the future?
5. Do we need that number of doctors?
6. What is the role of alternative medicine?
7. Are we keeping up to the changes and re medical practice and education?
8. Do we sacrifice quality for quantity?

There are so many contentious issues in the health and medicine. I think we have to be cou and candid within ourselves and start addressi issues, otherwise we will be left behind.

It is not my intention to force my views on th matters of medical education, but I do like to different opinions and make this journal one of the for exchanging them. I shall look forward to seei comments and views in the forthcoming issues.