

FEATURE ARTICLE

Contribution of Traditional Medicine in the Healthcare System of the Middle East

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ABSTRACT Unani medicine or Islamic medicine is one of the main healing systems in the world, which was set up by the Islamic physicians in the Middle East about a thousand years ago based on the teachings of Hippocrates and Galen. This medical system had been practiced widespread in the world including Europe until the 16th century and contributed greatly to the development of modern medicine. Despite the remarkable advancements in orthodox medicine, the traditional medicine has always been practiced in the Middle East communities. Due to cultural beliefs and practices, the Middle East communities have a very rich tradition in the utilization of herbal remedies as well as diverse spiritual techniques for treating various disorders. Traditional practitioners have become the main component of disease management in the Middle East and they have used herbal remedies along with spiritual techniques for the treatment of ailments mainly based on the Unani medicine.

KEYWORDS Middle East, traditional medicine, Unani medicine, Islamic medicine, traditional practitioners



The fundamentals of conventional medicine practiced in the modern world are based on Unani medicine and was set up about a thousand years ago by physicians in the Middle East. The word Unani refers to "Greek" in the Arabic language since the system was set based on the teachings of Hippocrates (460–377 BC) and Galen (131–210 AD). However, philosophy of the medical system was not documented until 1025 AD, when Avicenna wrote a medical book entitled "*The Cannon of Medicine*". In this book, Avicenna combined Aristotle's teaching of life directives of nature, humanity, and psyche with the humoral system of Hippocrates and Galen, emphasizing the harmony between the two⁽¹⁾. The Unani system and the Islamic medicine received great impetus during the reign of the Abbasids (750–1258 AD) and became a part of the respectable and rational science. Islamic medicine has still been practiced in Middle East communities today⁽²⁾.

The Unani system of medicine along with the traditional medical system has been practiced and flourished in Ottoman hospitals and universities until the end of the 16th century. Later, however, retrogressive bigotry fanaticism and centralized structure of the Ottoman Empire eventually affected the progress of medicine negatively. For centuries, divergence from

established rules was discouraged and medical progress in the territories under the Ottoman Empire, including the whole of Middle East stagnated⁽³⁾. Nevertheless, after the 19th century, the influence of Western medicine had become gradually evident.

During the Ottoman period, the borders of the empire extended to mid-Europe in the West, covering the whole Middle East including Caucasian territories and northern Africa. Patients had been treated based on the principles of Unani system of medicine in hospitals scattered within the empire. However, due to sheer size and scattered healing centers, "traditional medical practitioners" had served as an integral part of the health system particularly for ordinary citizens. Among these institutions, halk hekimi (traditional practitioner; a descendent of an experienced healer) had functions of a physician, i.e. visiting patients, making consultation, prescribing drugs and in fact performing minor surgical operations. Akhtar or attar shop was the main address for providing medicines prescribed by these healers. In the 19th century, the number of such shops located only in Istanbul, the capital city of the Ottoman Empire, was around 500⁽⁴⁾. The list of natural materials sold in these stores in Turkey was recorded and published by Baser, et al⁽⁵⁾.

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Traditional Practitioners

Apart from this above-mentioned institution, a number of specialized healers employing a variety of therapeutic techniques had practiced medicine. These types of traditional healers may be grouped depending on their treatment philosophies. The first group of healers uses mainly remedies or tools for treatment along with some rituals to strengthen the efficiency. Among these "Ocak" were the specialist healers on a particular symptom or disease. For example, healer in the "Sarılık ocağı" treated jaundice, by using a razor to cut and bleed pip or the area between eyebrows. Several other ocak types were as follows: the "Kütnü ocağı" treated some dermatological problems using some natural formulations, the "Temre ocağı" treated a type of lichen infection induced by Lichen simplex either simply by spitting on the affected area or practicing some ritual treatments, the "Ilancık ocağı" treated erysipelas infection by using a mollusk that is called "Mecca stone" and some herbal ointments, and the "Siğil ocağı" applied rituals for the treatment of warts. Special healers for bone setting were called "sınıkçı" and may also be classified under this group. The second group of traditional practitioners particularly practices religious forms of healing mainly based on the rituals of exorcism due to the retrogressive bigotry, such as the "kurşuncu" pour lead to expel devil, ghouls, or the "üfürükçü" or the "cinci hoca" (warlock hodja) was a so-called holy person and treats a range of illnesses from simple headaches to epilepsy or impotence. Their treatment strategy was mainly based on religious rituals to oust evil spirit, i.e. after reading particular verses of the Koran he blows his breath to the patient's body or sometimes draws particular figures on the affected area of the skin with a carbon pencil and then treat with particular verses of the Koran. After such treatments to expel the evil spirits they deliver curative amulets (muska) and suggest ritual prescriptions to keep the evil away from the patient.

During the state's transition from Ottoman reign to the Turkish Republic, biomedically based health care systems became the official system of the state. In medical schools, education is mainly based on the principles of the orthodox system. Therefore, a great majority of the physicians graduated from these schools reflect a conservative health conception. They do accept neither the traditional system nor the herbal medicine as a part of their treatments. However, the traditional medicine systems have still been practiced by the people but are officially unauthorized. Particularly in the inner

slopes of the Taurus mountain ranges in the southern coastal region from west to eastern parts, the traditional specialist healers such as "ocak" are still active partners of the healing system in Turkey.

An overview of the past and present situations in the other parts of the Middle East, focusing on Arab communities, is discussed by several authors^(2,6,7,8). Although scarcely practiced in Turkey, the traditional Unani medicine and its conservative form is still being practiced in the southern countries of Middle East from the south and southeast borders of Turkey to Saudi Arabia. However, name of the above-cited traditional practitioner changed from locality to locality. Some principles reflect important components of the ancient Mesopotamian traditions as well as ancient Egyptian medicine. Akhtars or attars are still popular outlets to purchase remedies from. The lists of natural remedies sold in attar shops throughout the Islamic countries in the Middle East were reported in the successive publications of Miki, et al^(5,9,10). On the other hand, traditional practitioners continue to perform healing rituals based on some of the teachings of the Koran⁽²⁾. In a recent study reporting the results of an inquiry, 65% of the participants believed that some diseases can only be healed by those faith-healing practices⁽²⁾.

Folk Medicine

In addition to these professional healers, folk medicine is another component of the traditional medicine. People use natural remedies, mostly herbals, for the treatment of their simple complaints and symptoms from ancient times onward (folk medicine). They mainly obtain materials from the vicinity of their residential area and prepare recipes following the teachings of their ancestors. Therefore, the materials used by traditional healers in traditional medicine and by the laypeople in folk medicine are different. The discrepancy is clearly evident in the lists of materials sold in attar shops, which was reported by Baser, et al⁽⁵⁾ and in the reports published on the folk medicines in Turkey⁽¹¹⁾.

In the greater Middle East, the richest flora has reportedly been in the Anatolian peninsula (Turkey). According to recent figures, the number of taxa growing in Turkish territories is estimated to be about 11 750. In the last 25 years, herbal remedies used in Turkish folk medicine have been investigated and documented using the scientific methodologies in ethnobotany⁽¹¹⁾. An

extensive database program has recently been set up to document the plants used in Turkish folk medicine (TUHIB) which accumulated 19 000 folk recipes against various disorders.

On the other hand, towards the southeastern part of the Anatolian peninsula, the flora becomes poorer. However, probably assuming that people only rely on Unani medicine, very few scientific reports on the folk medicines practiced in these communities have been found in the international literature. The list of remedies described in the study of Lev and Amal⁽¹²⁾ in Jordan markets was remarkably different than those reported in the neighboring regions by Said, et al⁽¹³⁾, who interviewed 31 local Arab practitioners, and by Ali-Shtayeh, et al⁽¹⁴⁾, who interviewed 102 native informants. As a matter of fact, a remarkable discrepancy has been observed in the material lists and utilizations reported in these studies.

Miraldi, et al⁽¹⁵⁾ also indicated that there is little literature on the traditional or medicinal plants of Iran. However, these publications do not reflect the real folkloric utilization by the rural people, but Unani medicine or a mixture of both. During their excursions in the west Azerbaijan villages neighboring the Turkish border, Miraldi, et al⁽¹⁵⁾ reported a rich flora and knowledge. However, since they also interviewed drug sellers and herbalists in the regional markets besides native people, the information reported may possibly be a mixture of both folkloric and Unani medicines. Comprehensive field expeditions throughout Iran may yield a high rate of folk remedies apart from the Unani medicines⁽¹⁶⁾.

Impact of Modernization

Modernization has always been regarded as the most important threatening factor on the traditional heritage. Primary influencing factors including urbanization, migrations, development of roads and communication media and easier access to orthodox medicine and drugs, etc. have been valid vanishing factors for the region⁽¹⁷⁾. Especially recently, coverage of the national health insurance system has prominently expanded in Turkey. Citizens in towns or cities have easier access to orthodox medicine and can easily get the prescribed drugs. Therefore, this recent improvement will inevitably negatively impact the community's preferences.

On the other hand, recently increased worldwide popularity of complementary and alternative medicines

has also influenced the community trends in Middle East countries. Articles or TV programs on the health benefits of the exotic natural remedies or formulations have become more frequent in the printed or visual media due to popularity of such information. As such, demand for attars, spice shops or herbalists supplying natural materials have increased. Consequently, the list of materials in these shops has changed considerably. Natural prescriptions are formulated based on various worldwide traditional medicine systems including Chinese medicine or Ayurvedic medicine, which have not attracted attention previously but have become available along with local formulations.

The higher number of scientific evidences on the biological activity profiles of herbal remedies has also recently increased the demand for natural therapies from physicians by their patients, who expect a safer remedy. Such situations have urged physicians to integrate these herbal medicines to their orthodox treatments. Since phytotherapy (herbal medicines) is not involved in the modern medical education programs, phytotherapy (European system) courses are organized for physicians. In fact, phytotherapy courses have started to be incorporated into the basic education programs as either compulsory (in Yeditepe University) or selective courses in Turkey. Recently, on 6th October 2010, a new regulation has been introduced for the registration and quality control of the traditional medicines by the Turkish Ministry of Health. It is expected that increased control on the quality of herbal medicines would increase the reputation of such herbal formulations in modern medicine. As a result of these current striking changes, a metamorphosis on the local traditional medicines knowledge would be inevitable as time goes by, which would influence the content of folk medicine negatively.

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