

‘Ali ibn Ridwan (998-1068):

On the Prevention of Bodily Ills in Egypt

trans. by Michael W. Dols, *Medieval Islamic Medicine*, Berkeley 1984.

(S.77)

Introduction

In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate.

The book of ‘Ali ibn Ridwan concerning the ways for preventing bodily ills in Egypt.

‘Ali ibn Ridwan said: Our objective is to give a brief account of the ways of preventing physical illnesses in Egypt. It is necessary first to set forth the causes for these maladies, so that we may be able to learn stratagems for their prevention. We ask God for help and for the happy outcome of what we seek. He is the sponsor of fulfillment by His grace and power.

[...]

If our book is of the kind that we have described, the need for it is imperative for the elite and the common people of Egypt, as well as for the foreigners who come here, in order to maintain the health of their bodies and to remove their illnesses. The ones who most need this book are the doctors, for the required treatment cannot be known without a knowledge of the temperament of the country and what particularly occurs in it.

(S. 115-118)

A Summary of All That Has Been Said and Addition to the Commentary on the Six Causes that Determine Health and Illness

If these things are as we have described, it is desirable that we add a brief excursus on the six causes. The state of the body's temperament is good in the balanced air; the digestion improves because the light animal spirit that is in us becomes clear; and the natural heat spreads through the body in moderation. The air that deviates from the balance changes the bodies that are not accustomed to it but does not harm the bodies that are used to it, unless they are greatly susceptible to disease or are liable to deviate immoderately from their normal functioning.

Likewise, concerning the statement about what is eaten and drunk, if people become accustomed to specific foods and their bodies grow up with them, they fall ill when these foods are not available. Also, customary physical exercise may be a reason for good health because it dissolves the superfluities and smoky vapors that collect in the body. The limbs of one who has become habituated to physical exercise are firmer and stronger. Therefore, the peasants and all other workmen have greater strength and spirit (29a) than the people of leisure and luxury; the superfluities in their bodies are less. Moderate quiet makes bodies

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healthy and strong. Being excessively sedentary, however, does not allow the vapor to evaporate, so that congestion of the superfluties occurs, which causes harm to the body. For this reason, sedentary bodies become much more susceptible to illnesses. Consequently, quiet and leisured Egyptians more readily fall victims to illness. Excessive physical exercise also harms the bodies because it exhausts them and generates smoky superfluties in them.

If sleep and wakefulness are balanced, they produce and preserve health. When asleep, digestion improves because of the descent of heat to the interior; wakefulness dissolves the superfluties of digestion because of the ascent of heat to the exterior. Excessive sleep cools the body, and the superfluties increase in it; excessive wakefulness makes the body dry and spoils its digestion.

The teaching about retention and evacuation is similar, for if the superfluties retained in the body are excessive, they spoil digestion and decay rushes to them. If what is evacuated is more than what is retained, it is inevitable that this surplus is from the essence (29b) of the humors of the body itself, which are very vital to the body; consequently, their evacuation causes illness to occur. Therefore, what is retained should be equal to what is evacuated. Galen and other physicians said that in the winter many viscid, phlegmatic substances and filth gather in the body and stick fast in the stomach, the vessels, and the veins, as viscid and filthy substances stick fast in the watercourses of canals and drains. When spring begins, it dissolves these phlegmatic, viscid humors; then, it increases the amount of blood. The filth that accompanies the humors putrefies them; therefore, it is necessary to evacuate these before they change the blood. The vessels and veins should be cleansed of their recurring filth by purgative medicines.

Likewise, in the summer fierce humors and harmful filth collect in the body and remain in the bottom of the stomach, vessels, and veins. When autumn begins, the change of the air stirs them up and burns many of them. Because of this, it is necessary that they be evacuated (30a) before they cause harm to the body. Thus, it is desirable that every year the bodies be emptied in the spring and autumn, so that the vessels are cleansed of their filth and purged of the bad things that persist in them. There is one kind of purgative that should be used in the autumn and another kind that should be used in the spring. The desirable medication for evacuation in the spring should purge, to a great extent, much of the phlegm and viscid substances. The medication for emptying the body in the autumn should purge, to a great extent, much of the yellow bile and the fierce filth, because of what we have presented earlier. It is necessary that the medication of autumn also evacuates the moisture peculiar to Egypt, especially because the moistures produced in people's bodies at that time are great. These two evacuations –one in the spring and the other in the autumn- eliminate the filth that becomes congested in the bodies between the two seasons.

The psychic evens, such as anger, sadness, (30b) and joy, do not create illness if they do not go beyond the proper bounds. It is desirable that the people of Egypt increase their gaiety and joy in order to strengthen the natural heat of their bodies, for the digestion improves, and the congestion in their bodies lessens.

It is evident from what we have said that every one of the six factors produces and sustains good health if its quantity and quality are well balanced. When they deviate from what is

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appropriate, they bring about illness. Therefore, the customary and epidemic illnesses of Egypt, and other illnesses as well, increase and decrease according to the degree of one's awareness of these factors and his negligence or attention to them. For example, whoever increases the consumption of food that produces black bile, his body is susceptible to melancholic illnesses. This is the case with the other causes. These six factors may change the temperament of man, his aging, his physical constitution, and his habits; they may affect the influence of the current season and the temperament of male and female. What we have said of these important things is sufficient.