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Abstract: In this article, the author discusses Abu Ali al'Husain ibn Abdullah ibn Sina, known as Avicenna in the West. He was the most famous physician, philosopher, encyclopaedist, mathematician and astronomer of his time. Following in the tradition of Greek medicine, Avicenna's understanding of illness included mental disorders such as hydrophobia, insomnia, amnesia, hysteria, mania, and melancholia. His appreciation for the mind-body connection is apparent in that he identified love as the cause for psychosomatic fevers and weakness. A further review of Avicenna's case work provides reason to believe that he not only knew about the role of suggestion in therapy, he also seemed to understand the dynamics of social influence which contribute to the power of suggestion. This is especially true in regard to his utilization of the symptoms. Avicenna believed that medicine is not limited to the practice of surgery and pharmacology but rather "is a science by which we learn about the conditions of the human body in health and in the absence of health, in order to maintain health or to restore it."

Abu Ali Sina: An Ancient Physician's Use of Modern Hypnosis

By Dan Short, Ph.D.

The practice of medicine during antiquity often consisted of potion, ritual, and incantation the success of which is now attributed primarily to the placebo effect. Centuries of ancient case reports stand as testimony to the capacity of the human mind and body to respond with healing, when it is expected, despite medical mismanagement. However, in the case of ancient Arabian medicine, it appears that master physicians, such as Rázi and Avicenna, recognized the power of thought and emotion, which were skillfully applied in the service of Greek derived psychotherapeutics. When considering sophisticated forms of suggestion, such as those employed in modern hypnosis, Avicenna's practice makes interesting study because of his reputation as a philosopher and medical expert, a writer who helped carry the torch of ancient Greek medicine. A thought-provoking question to consider is whether the brilliant Avicenna intuitively made use of modern hypnosis, while still lacking the paradigm necessary to conceptualize his work.

Abu Ali al'Husain ibn Abdullah ibn Sina (A.D. 980 – 1037), known as Avicenna in the West, was the most famous physician, philosopher, encyclopaedist, mathematician and astronomer of his time. His reputation as a medical expert surpassed that of most of his predecessors and spread tremendously for centuries after his death not only in Islam but also in Christendom. His prestige was such that medical educators upheld his writings as a complete doctrine to which nothing could be added. Unfortunately, this extraordinary reverence caused an immediate leveling off of medical education and hindered progressive thinking in those places where his prestige was held so high

(O'Malley, 1970). Anyone who proposed improvements was considered a heretic or lacking educational qualification. In the words of one mid 12th-century writer, Nizámí-I-Arúdí of Samarqand, "Whosoever, therefore, finds fault with these two great men [Avicenna and Aristotle] will have cast himself out from the fellowship of the wise, ranked himself with madmen, and revealed himself as fit company only for fools" (Browne, 1921, p. 64). The following list of accomplishments provides some idea as to why Avicenna obtained such a high level of respect.

Avicenna was born in Afshana, a village near Bukhara in Turkistan. He was a precocious youth who at the age of ten knew the Koran and many Arabic classics by heart. Before he was 16, he had mastered contemporary physics, mathematics, logic and metaphysics. At the age of 16, he began his study of medicine, which included actual practice in treating the sick. He wandered through villages acting as a physician by day and during the evening he gathered students for philosophical and scientific discussion. At the age of 18, his reputation was such that he was summoned to treat Nooh Ibn Mansoor, the King of Bukhhara, of an illness in which the most prominent physicians had given up hope. Under Avicenna's care, the King recovered and wished to reward him. The young Avicenna only desired permission to use the King's amply stocked library. He was granted this wish and appointed as court physician to the King. He remained in this position until the fall of the Samanid Empire in 999 (Catholic Encyclopedia, 1999; Encarta, 2000).

At the age of 21, Avicenna moved to Hamadan, where he wrote his famous *Al-Qánún fi al-Tibb* (The Canon of Medicine), which for several centuries remained the principal authority in medical schools both in Europe and in Asia. The *Canon of Medicine* is now recognized as the most famous single book in the history of medicine. It is a systematic encyclopedia, over a million words in length, which describes pharmacological methods and 760 drugs. *The Cannon of Medicine* was first introduced into European universities in a 12th-century translation by Gerard of Cremona, printed 15 times before the year of 1500, and then in a new translation by Andrea Alpago of Belluno, in the year of 1527. It also was the second text ever to be printed in Arabic, in the year of 1593 (Encarta, 2000; Gruner, 1930). Many of Avicenna's ideas about medicine are believed to be original, including the close relationship between emotional and physical changes, the physiology of sleep, the importance of purifying drinking water, the influence of climate on health and illness, the importance of dietetics, the contagiousness of tuberculosis, the introduction of drugs into the urethra, the use of vaginal tampons, the use of oral anesthetics, and the use of animals for testing the strength of drugs (Goodman, 1992). However, critics have argued that when writing medical texts, Avicenna relied on compilation, reorganization and regrouping of data from books by earlier authors, often without acknowledging the source. For example, Avicenna incorporated the idea of six common and natural health essentials into his medical encyclopedia without giving any credit to Hunayn or the writers of Greek humoral theory (i.e., the work of Hippocrates and Galen) (O'Malley, 1970).

Avicenna's contributions were not limited to medicine but also included mathematics, physics, music and other fields. He explained the "casting out of nines" and its application to the verification of squares and cubes. He made several

astronomical observations, and devised a device similar to the vernier, to increase the precision of instrumental readings. In physics, his contributions included the study of different forms of energy, heat, light and such concepts as force, vacuum and infinity. He made the observation that if the perception of light is due to the emission of some sort of particles by the luminous source, the speed of light must be finite. He propounded an interconnection between time and motion, and investigated the effect of gravity and he devised an air thermometer. In the field of chemistry, he did not believe in the possibility of chemical transmutation because, in his opinion, the metals differed in a fundamental sense. These views were radically opposed to those prevailing at the time. His treatise on minerals was the main source of geological information for the Christian encyclopaedists of the 13th century (Elgood, 1934; Goodman, 1992).

Avicenna successively served several Persian potentates as physician and adviser. While devoting much of his time to teaching and healing, Avicenna remained highly prolific, producing a large number of lengthy, detailed texts. In all, Avicenna wrote 99 books. Most of these were written in Arabic, the language of religious and scientific expression in the Muslim world at that time. However, two of his works, the *Daneshnameh-e-Alai* (Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences) and a small treatise on the pulse, were written in Farsi, his native language. His writings also include an autobiography, *The Life of Avicenna*, chronicled by his faithful friend and disciple, Abu Obeyd Juzjani (Sorsanus), covering the final 25 years of his life. The last 14 years of his life were spent in the company of Ala ad-Daula, the ruler of Isfahan, whom he served as scientific adviser and physician and followed on all his journeys and military ventures. However, the excessive mental exertion as well as political turmoil affected his health. Worn out by hard work, Avicenna developed colic on a trip to Hamedan where he died in 1037 A.D. (Goodman, 1992).

Following in the tradition of Greek medicine, Avicenna's understanding of illness included mental disorders such as hydrophobia, insomnia, amnesia, hysteria, mania, and melancholia. His appreciation for the mind-body connection is apparent in that he identified love as the cause for psychosomatic fevers and weakness, as illustrated in the following case:

...a relative of the ruler of that province lay sick of a malady which baffled all the local doctors. Avicenna, though his identity was then unknown, was invited to give his opinion, and, after examining the patient, requested the collaboration of someone who knew all the districts and towns of the province, and who repeated their names while Avicenna kept his finger on the patient's pulse. At the mention of a certain town he felt a flutter in the pulse. "Now," said he, "I need someone who knows all the houses, streets and quarters of this town." Again when a certain street was mentioned the same phenomenon was repeated, and once again when the names of the inhabitants of a certain household were enumerated. Then Avicenna said, "It is finished. This lad is in love with such-and such a girl, who lives in such-and-such a house, in such-and such a street, in such-and-such a quarter of town; and the girl's face is the patient's cure." So the marriage was solemnized at a fortunate hour chosen by Avicenna, and thus the cure was completed (Browne, 1921, p. 85).

This type of marriage therapy (in the truest sense of the word) was evidently used by Avicenna on more than one occasion. While explaining, in the *Cannon of Medicine*, his technique for treating “excessive love” and the surprising efficacy of the treatment, Avicenna states, “...we were astonished therat and realized the subordination of [human] nature to mental imaginations” (Browne, 1921, p. 86). This important idea has been “rediscovered” on numerous occasions throughout the history of medicine. The unstated implication of Avicenna’s words suggests a knowledge at some level of the importance of thought to the healing process.

A further review of Avicenna’s case work provides reason to believe that he not only knew about the role of suggestion in therapy, he also seemed to understand the dynamics of social influence which contribute to the power of suggestion. This is especially true in regard to his utilization of the symptom as described in the following case:

A certain prince of the House of Buwayh was afflicted with melancholia, and suffered from the delusion that he was a cow. Everyday...he would low like a cow, causing annoyance to everyone, and crying, “Kill me, so that a good stew may be prepared from my flesh,” until matters reached such a pass that he would eat nothing, while the physicians were unable to do him any good.” Finally, Avicenna...was persuaded to take the case in hand...First of all he sent a message to the patient bidding him be of good cheer because the butcher was coming to slaughter him, whereat...the sick man rejoiced. Some time afterwards, Avicenna, holding a knife in his hand, entered the sickroom saying, “Where is this cow that I may kill it?” The patient lowed like a cow to indicate where he was. By Avicenna’s orders, he was laid on the ground bound hand and foot. Avicenna then felt him all over and said, “He is too lean, and not ready to be killed; he must be fattened.” Then they offered him suitable food, of which he now partook eagerly, and gradually he gained strength, got rid of his delusion, and was completely cured. (Browne, 1921, pp. 88-89)

In this case Avicenna employed suggestion but in a manner that circumvented the possibility of any resistance on the part of the patient. The statement to be of good cheer and the assurances that the patient would soon have what he wanted are powerful suggestions delivered indirectly using the drama and resiliency of the patient’s own (pathological) belief system. As explained in the following paragraph, these therapeutic elements stand at the very core of modern hypnosis.

The formal adoption of what is now considered the traditional hypnosis paradigm is typically attributed to the Nancy School of Hypnotism, under the leadership of Liébeault and Bernheim, which attributed the therapeutic agency of hypnosis to the power of suggestion. Similar to traditional hypnosis, modern hypnosis presupposes the use of suggestion but not always in such a straightforward fashion and sometimes without requiring an induction ritual. Pierre Janet, of Paris, France, was the first to describe the utility of indirect suggestion. Janet described the dynamics of indirect suggestion stating, “Doubtless, some suggestions have an imperative character, but it is no less certain that well-marked suggestion can be effected without anything like an order; in fact, suggestion by insinuation is often far more potent” (Janet, 1925, p. 50).

Also known for his masterful use of indirect suggestion, Milton Erickson is the first to bring the use of metaphor, drama, confusion and shock to the practice of modern hypnosis. As stated by Hughes and Rothovius (1996), "Erickson was particularly effective in situations where he could make use of his talent for creating high drama, in which the patient played the leading role" (p. 233). In the previous case of Avicenna, we can employ the constructs of modern hypnosis to help us recognize and understand Avicenna's use of indirect suggestion (i.e., good things will soon happen for you), the use of drama and shock (i.e., the patient was bound hand and foot and approached with a knife), and a paradoxical directive that required the patient to return to better health in order to remain true to the course of the pathology (i.e., to continue acting as a cow being prepared for slaughter). Avicenna's, individually tailored, psychosocial treatment of melancholia stands as a brilliant example of the ancient use of modern hypnosis.

In 1899, Wesley Cook, a professor of physiology at the University of Chicago, commented on the value of hypnosis by identifying it as, "...the most practical science of the age" (Hughes & Rothovius, 1996, p. 245). The veracity of this statement may help explain the reemergence of suggestive therapeutics throughout the history of medicine. Because of its practicality and broad range of application, the power of suggestion has always played an important role in the healing arts (i.e., it produces results even when its implementers do not know they are using it). As the science of hypnosis has developed, its magical appearance has been replaced with systematic replication and carefully controlled outcomes. The hope for the future is that the powerful resources of the human mind will be more readily included in treatment planning, not only in the form of psychotherapy but also as an adjunct to all forms of medicine. As implied by Avicenna's opening statement in the *Canon*, medicine is not limited to the practice of surgery and pharmacology but rather "...is a science by which we learn about the conditions of the human body in health and in the absence of health, in order to maintain health or to restore it" (Gruner, 1930).

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