

HUMORAL THEORY OF UNANI TIBB

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Humoral theory is the basic theory of Unani medicine. It was propounded by Hippocrates, father of Medicine, who was born in 460 B.C. in the Island of Cos. He put forward the concept that matter exists in three forms : solid, liquid and gas. The solid part comprises the skeleton of the body, the liquid, the fluids, humours¹ (*akhlaf*) and the gas, air (*rooh*). He further postulated that the humours are four in number : blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These four humours are different with regard to colour, appearance, composition, physical properties and proportion. According to him the functions of the body, whether in health or disease², are regulated by these four humours. He described the health as the primary state in which these fluids are present in correct proportion to each other, both in strength and quantity and are well mixed. Sickness is said to be the condition where deficiency or excess of any of these humours takes place or any of these humours are separated out or a qualitative change in the composition or physical properties of humour/humours results. Such a change is denoted as disturbance in the balance of the humours which exists in perfect health and this is manifested in the form of pain or distress to the organ/body at the site where the imbalance takes place. Further, it was believed that the humours are inter-convertible. If a humour assumes the colour or consistency, composition of any other humour by transformation then it loses its former properties and entirely becomes the one of whose characteristics it has acquired³.

Galen (A.D. 131) described three conditions of the human body as : health, sickness and where there is neither perfect health nor wholly sickness. The third condition of the body is stated to be the condition of old age and of bedridden convalescents.⁴

Avicenna, the philosopher-physician has, in his monumental work *Qanun fil Tib* (Canon of Medicine),⁵ dealt with the concept of humours in great detail. He says that "Humour is a moist fluid and mobile body capable to dissolve or mix with blood by which it can be carried to different organs." He defines the good humour as "one whose virtue is to become a part of the nourishing essence by itself or along with others or resembling it singly or with other and finally to become substitute of that thing which has depleted from it. When the humour loses this virtue it is said to be vitiated or redundant. Such humours, he advises, should be

got rid of as they bring no good to the system but interfere in the normal body functions and change the temperament" (balance state of the organ/organs or body). He further says that humours are formed by the digestion and assimilation of food. Therefore, according to him, the quality and quantity of these humours depends basically on what forms one's diet and its proper digestion and assimilation by the system. Abnormal conditions such as sorrow, grief, stress or strain or such other emotional states which adversely affect the digestive process and hence the disturbance in the equilibrium of the humours of the body results. Further, he says, "And I say as well that humoral fluids, good and bad, are confined within these four varieties, blood variety is the best of this, and phlegm variety and choler variety and black bile variety. And blood is hot and moist." Avicenna defined humour as the first product of transformation of digestion but it was a point of controversy among his commentators and the latter differed with his point of view. Perhaps Avicenna's contention was to show the priority in the transformation as regards the formation of humours over all other subsequent transformations. His arguments are because it is assumed that food is subjected to several transformations before it is assimilated and replenishes the loss sustained by the system; and because the food undergoes several changes and transformations before assimilation but the first alimentary transformation is that in which the four humours are formed. These transformations are subject to different factors depending upon the nature of the ailment, digestive processes, humoral requirement of the system besides the physico-chemical considerations.

In short according to Avicenna three grades of humours are produced in the system, i.e. good, bad and redundant. The good humour has the quality to replenish the loss suffered by the organism while bad humour must be got rid of as soon as possible. The redundant humour is defined as the humour which is in excess of the requirement, and it is rare that it can serve the want of the organism by changing into good humour. On the contrary, it is necessary to relieve the system of this burden.

How the deficiency of the humour is replenished depends, besides other factors, on the nature of the deficiency itself. If the system suffers deficiency of a single humour then that humour by itself is sufficient to make up the deficiency and restore the site of deficiency to its normal composition and function, whereas if the deficiency is multiple then the major part is played by that humour of which the deficiency is greatest and alone with other factors of deficiency restores the site to its normal composition and function.⁶

CONCEPT OF DISEASE IN HIPPOCRATIC THEORY OF HUMOURS

The disease may be caused by (a) deficiency, (b) plethora and (c) segregation of the humour, i.e. alteration of the normal qualities and quantitative humoral composition at the site of the disease or pain. Therefore treatment must be aimed at

restoration of that normal state. It depends upon good sense of the attending physician to precisely locate and measure the humoral abnormality and treat it by measured doses of such medicaments as should specifically affect the site and quantitatively supply the specific deficiency.

The humoral imbalance can be corrected by medication coupled with correct diet and digestion, while incorrect diet and incomplete digestion can aggravate the disease condition or interfere with the healing effect of the medicine.⁷

On this doctrine of four humours is based the concept of "temperament" or complexion (*mizaj*, plural *amzija*)⁸ the natural properties (*tabayi*). *Mizaj* or temperament indicates the state of equilibrium between the four natural properties or four humours. A shift in the equilibrium results in the disturbance of the temperament. But even a normal healthy *mizaj* is not practically a constant quantity. Each region, season, age, individual and organ having its own special and appropriate type of temperament. Amongst these nine types of temperaments are recognized, namely the equable (*mutadil*), i.e. having no preponderance or excess of any single humour but all equal in strength which is practically non-existent. The four simple complexions are hot, cold, dry and moist and the four compounds are the hot and dry, the hot and moist, the cold and dry and the cold and moist. Excluding the rare case of a perfect equilibrium, every individual will be either of the bilious complexion, which is hot and dry, the melancholic, which is cold and dry, the phlegmatic, which is cold and moist, or the sanguine which is hot and moist.

While treating a disease due to a hot, dry or moist complexion with food or drug of the opposite quality, regard has to be paid to these idiosyncrasies. The natural property inherent in each food or drug exist in one of the four degrees. Thus for example, such a substance is hot in the first degree is a food, if hot in the second degree, both a food and medicine, if hot in the third degree, a medicine not a food, if in the fourth degree, a poison⁸. Another fourfold division of substances which reacts on the human body is into those which act beneficially, both internally and externally, like wheat which in stomach is a food⁹ and externally a poultice to 'ripen' wounds or sores, those which are beneficial internally but mischievous externally, like garlic, which taken internally, increases the natural heat, but applied externally acts as a poison, those which are poisons internally but antidotes externally, like litharge (*murduzsang*) and verdigris or acetate of copper (*zungur*) and lastly those which both externally and internally act as poison like aconite (*bish*) and ergot (*qurun-i-sanbul*)¹⁰.

According to Gruner, the translator of the first volume of Avicenna's *Canon of Medicine*,¹¹ one has to use the word temperament, in a psychological sense, in a medical sense. It should imply a blend of humours. There is a pattern of humours, since all are present in every individual. But whether the tempera-

ment is hot or cold or dry or moist is determined by the proportions of four elements.

This is one advantage to restoring the doctrine of elements to their original elements—they are the common denominator between temperaments, humours, mental make-up, faculties and emotional character of a person.” (Commentary on the *Canon of Medicine* of Avicenna, Hamdard National Foundation, Pakistan, Karachi, vol. II, No. 7/9, p. 14).

Avicenna says humours exist as hot and moist—“hot/dry-cold/moist-cold/dry.” He believes that the restoration of a healthy state means bringing the body to a normal balance. This appears to be true, both by the humoral doctrine or under the modern biochemical-physiological view-point. To achieve this humoral balance Avicenna recommended, among other methods, venesection and a number of *eliminants* and rectifiers.

The humoral theory remained the basis of diagnosis and treatment by the Greco-Arab physicians for all diseased conditions. The practitioners of this system in medieval period (as even today) believed in the doctrine of humours and temperament and took them as guiding principles of treatment. They never disputed these theories propounded by Avicenna in his *Canon of Medicine*. At times, they eulogised him and wrote long commentaries to explain the intricacies of the *Canon*. Among them the most famous being Hakim Ali Gilani who flourished during the reign of Akbar the Great. He learnt Tibb from Hakim Fatehullah Shirazi and wrote commentary on *Canon of Medicine*.

The another famous Tabib who wrote commentary on *Canon of Medicine* is Hakim Fatehullah. He rendered his works in Persian language.¹²

As such it is concluded that the humoral theory which was enunciated by Hippocrates was later explained and expanded by the celebrated, Hakim Bu Ali Sina (Avicenna). The theory worked as the basis for diagnosis and treatment.

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