

Islam and Public Health

Omer H El-Hamdoon, *BDS, MMedSci, MA (Islamic Studies)*
General Dental Practitioner, Guildford, UK

Correspondence: omerehamdoon@hotmail.com

The NHS (England) defines public health as about helping people to stay healthy and protecting them from threats to their health. Sometimes public health activities involve helping individuals, at other times they involve dealing with wider factors that have an impact on the health of many people (for example an age-group, an ethnic group, a locality, or a country).

Acheson defines public health as **“the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through organized efforts of society”**.¹

Islam claims to be a system of life that covers all aspects of human life. In Arabic, it is named as a *dīn*, which is translated as a way-of-life. And any system which addresses human needs will have to encompass the human necessities for mind, body, and soul. Indeed, the concept of the body is fundamental, as it is viewed as a vehicle, through which a person will carry the mind and soul.

The Prophet said, “The animal that doesn’t stop for rest will not cover any ground, nor will it remain long.”² Giving the similitude of the body as the human vehicle. Islam addresses the care one should undertake for the body, by providing general and specific notions which enable the individual to maintain optimal health or at least attempt to.

In the primary Islamic texts, we find multiple indications which point towards healing and cure, and driving important notions in public health, although not defined as such due to it preceding the terminology. In modern times, as we understand public health, and this field has become vital in developing communities, we can reflect on the Islamic messages and associate them with this discipline.

The emergence of Islam dates back in the seventh century when medicine was very much in its primitive state; and much relied on from traditional practices and herbalist remedies. Having said that, it does not mean

that these are of a lesser quality. Herbalist remedies tend to work on generalised approaches and aim at a holistic approach. And this is why we note from the Islamic medicinal principles, there is reference to remedies which deal with wider concepts, aimed at prevention, reducing inflammation and strengthening the immune system.

Islam as a practice which claims divinity in its sources, is unique in being preserved with great accuracy. It is very possible that much of Islamic practice are indeed found in the early traditions of other Prophets, who may not have had their tradition accurately or fully recorded. In contrast, the Prophet Muhammad’s words and sayings are highly preserved and greatly scrutinised for their authenticity. Being a religion, much of the practices are linked to an individuals’ rituals and worship, and this allows for better compliance. We know that those who have a belief system or engage in spirituality are more adherent to medicinal regimes, as they have better outlooks.³

Prevention is better than the cure

Great emphasis is placed on prevention within the Islamic Public Health messages. The prevention elements are included in the whole discourse of good decisions in daily living, from eating to cleanliness and taking appropriate precautions.

The importance of cleanliness

Importance is put on cleanliness of the body as well as the spirit. The Prophet’s saying, “Cleanliness is half of faith”⁴ puts great emphasis on the importance of maintaining cleanliness in all avenues. A further saying, “God is clean and loves cleanliness”⁵ encourages a god-conscious individual to strive towards that which is loved by God. Another quotation from the Prophet: “Cleanse with all that you can, for Allah has built Islam on cleanliness, and the only ones admitted to Paradise are those who are clean.”⁶

Regular Washing and Clean water ⁷

Despite emerging in a desert environment with limited water resources, Islamic teaching gave precedence to using water for regular washing as part of acts of worship. Muslims are required to carry out *wudu'* (ablutions) prior to engaging in the five daily prayers. *Wudu'* involves the washing of those limbs that are apparent and used the most in daily life and interactions, namely the face, arms, and feet.⁸ Additionally, a full wash to encompass the whole body is encouraged on a weekly basis, when attending public gatherings. It is made mandatory following acts of intimacy between spouses and following the end of a woman's monthly cycle or post-natal bleeding.⁹ Linking the obligation to these acts further promotes regular full washing.

We know that regular washing is of great benefit for the individual, as it is a mode for cleansing and removing dirt, dead skin and reducing pathogens. Whilst it might be common knowledge today, past societies considered washing to be a privilege, with anecdotal evidence describing how people washed once a year on average.

Washing of hands before and after food

The Prophet said, "Of the blessing of food is to make ablution before it and after it."¹⁰ Some commentators say that the ablution referred here is a reference to the washing of hands as opposed to the full ablution. This practice has important consequences in the reduction of oral-faecal diseases such as typhoid and cholera¹¹ as well as overall reduction in infection.¹²

Cleaning of impurities

Islam identified certain items are filth, which require to be cleaned of the body, clothes, and floor. The purification from these items further promotes health, as these items are potential carriers of pathogens. These include urine, stools, blood, pus, vomit, dead carcasses, etc. When a man got up and urinated in the mosque, the Prophet instructed to get buckets of water to pour over the urine to wash away the filth¹³. We know that bodily fluids do carry pathogens and can be media for growth. During the 7th Century, there was no understanding of Microorganisms, which came much later in the 19th Century.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in the ancient Western World,

Romans and other Europeans were washing their clothes in urine used as a stain-remover to dissolve grease, loosen dirt, and bleach yellowing fabrics. Classifying dead carcasses as filth also directly impacted on health, as it meant avoiding these items from one's diet.

Dental Health

Great emphasis is placed on oral health, as openly demonstrated by the Prophet Muhammad, and preached. There are substantial texts in which he encourages tooth brushing on different occasions, more than the twice-a-day regime advocated by modern dentists.

In addition to this, he has been reported to brush his tongue as part of the routine. Whilst the benefits of tongue brushing for general oral health isn't established¹⁵,¹⁶, it has definitely been demonstrated to help with halitosis.

The encouragement of regular tooth brushing is an important preventative tool in preventing dental caries and gingivitis and periodontitis, coupled with the favourable outcome of fresher breath.

Nasal Irrigation

One of the steps in the Muslim ablution is the nasal irrigation. It is described as sniffing up water through the nose, and then to expel the water thereafter. Some accounts encourage to be extreme in his process when one is not fasting.

A clinical review and literature review by Lance *et. al* demonstrated the benefits of nasal irrigation in dealing with nasal symptoms.¹⁷

Usage of right and left hands

Islam introduced a system to its followers which encourages a demarcation between how hands are used. 'Aishah reported that her husband the Prophet preferred the right hand for his eating/ drinking, and his left hand for his cleansing.

By following this system, there is clear demonstration of potential reduction in spreading contaminants that may come from one's nose or indeed from back passage.

Healthy gut

There is a great need for better gut health. Modern medicine has placed great weighting on having a healthy gut.

Modern western society is suffering from a crisis which is obesity¹⁸. Delormieret *al* doesn't shy away from terming it a crisis, and they have described how it is linked to obesogenic environments and societal trends that encourage overeating and little physical activity. They add that preventing obesity, however, has predominantly focused on the behaviour of individuals. Islam dealt with the issue of eating through public health messages, although they were general statements, and not primarily aimed at obesity. Deeply rooted in the message of Islam is the importance of addressing eating behaviour.

In many of his traditions, the Prophet discouraged overeating. He said, "The human has not filled a vessel worse than the stomach. It is enough for the human to have a few morsels of food to enable him to straighten his back. If he must eat, then a third for his food, a third for his drink and a third for his breath."¹⁹

Other messages include the importance of healthy eating. It is no doubt that traditional society didn't have the dangers of modern society of refined food, preservatives, and fast food. Nonetheless, the focus was on eating well and reducing consumption.

One important perspective is to deny oneself what it desires, and not to eat any food which one is tempted to. This was a clear message from a religious perspective which sought that the human overcome his desires and temptations.

Halal Meat

The topic of halal meat is in need for deeper discussion. Islam prohibited the consumption of certain meats and gave great weighting on the preparation of an animal meat for consumption. Strict injunctions meant that for a land animal to be consumed, it must be slaughtered, and its blood spilled. If an animal were to die in another way without allowing the blood to spill, then it would be deemed as unlawful.

Blood is a nutrient filled media for bacteria which acts as spoilers of food. By commanding this practice, through the health messages, it greatly reduced the contamination

of the meat, and thence reduced disease associated with bacterial growth. The method of halal slaughtering isn't the topic for this article, but it warrants further explanation to demonstrate that this mode is truly an important public health message.

The seeking of medicine and cure

Islam also encouraged seeking cures and medicine. One challenge to public health is to get patients to seek medical treatment. In developed society, this may not be a wide issue, but in traditional developing societies it remains a big step for them to go forth.

The Prophet was clear in advocating for healthy practices, and to seek medicine and cure when ill. He said, "Seek remedies, O people. For God has not placed any disease without making for it a cure, except one illness: old age."²⁰

This served as an important guidance for humans – and Muslims in particular – to seek for remedies, under the general notion that every illness has a cure or remedy. On the other hand, Islam discourages the use of superstitious behaviour. Research by Anwar et al (2012)²¹ showed that in Pakistan – as an example – there were still trends of using myths and superstitions relating to health-seeking behaviour.

Sexual Health

The prevalence of STDs in western society is well documented with specific diseases identified to be spread through sexual intercourse. The increase of sexual promiscuity plays a role in spreading STDs²².

Islam, along with most other religions, was strictly opposed to sex outside marriage. This clear injunction had direct effect on reducing the incidence of STDs within the community. As societies abandoned religion and thence the abstinence of extra-marital relations, STDs became more prevalent, with new disease being identified in the 20th Century.

Conclusion

Embedded in the Islamic teachings is an array of advice which amount to important public health advice. Coupled with the religious element, it has gained much traction among adherents of the religion. We know that a belief in a divine system gives more probability for better uptake in the community. This article is aimed as an introduction

to the topic of Islam and public health, and each category warrants further elaboration.

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