

Islamic Medical Ethics: A legacy of compassionate care

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Introduction

Islamic medical ethics, deeply rooted in the Qur'an, Hadith and Fiqh (Islamic ruling), has influenced healthcare for centuries, shaping patient care, professional conduct, and bioethical decision-making¹. These principles align with Beauchamp and Childress' Four Principles of Biomedical Ethics – autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice – but are framed within a religious perspective that emphasises moral and spiritual responsibilities alongside medical duty².

Historical contributions

Islamic scholars were pioneers in ethical medical practice. Al-Ruhawi (9th Century) wrote *Adab al-Tabib* (The conduct of a physician), one of the earliest medical ethics writings, which highlighted the physician's duty to act with integrity, maintain confidentiality (amaanah), and ensure patient welfare³. Ibn Sina (10th-11th Century) explored informed consent and the ethical responsibilities of physicians in *The Canon of Medicine*, while Al-Zahrawi (10th Century) laid the foundation for surgical ethics, stressing patient safety and professional accountability³. These contributions helped shape both middle age and modern bioethics, influencing Islamic and Western traditions³.

Islamic framing of the four principles

Islamic ethics balances autonomy (ikhtiyar) with divine guidance. While patients have the right to make healthcare decisions, these choices must align with religious and moral obligations⁴. Seeking medical treatment is encouraged when a cure is likely (Sunan Abu Dawood 3855), and though withdrawing unsuccessful

care is permissible, euthanasia and assisted suicide remain strictly prohibited (Qur'an 17:33)⁴. Beneficence (ihsan) and non-maleficence (la darar) are fundamental to Islamic views on medical interventions, including organ donation⁴. Islam permits organ transplantation if it saves a life (Qur'an 5:32), but postmortem donation remains debated due to bodily preservation concerns⁴. Justice (adl), a key ethical principle, ensures fairness in healthcare⁵. This principle was historically embodied by Bimaristans (hospitals), which provided free, universal medical care centuries before modern public health systems³.

Contemporary relevance

Islamic bioethics continues to influence global healthcare debates, particularly in end-of-life care, genetic research, artificial intelligence in medicine and resource allocation⁶. Institutions such as the Islamic Organisation for Medical Sciences (IOMS) collaborate with global health organisations to integrate Islamic ethical perspectives into modern medical practice⁶. Recognising this legacy fosters culturally competent, inclusive healthcare, ensuring that medical advancements remain grounded in both ethical principles and religious values, addressing the needs of diverse populations worldwide⁶.

References

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Table: comparison of the four principles with Islamic concepts

Principle	Islamic Concept	Qur'an	Hadith	Fiqh Perspective
Autonomy (Ikhtiyar)	Free will in decision-making guided by religious principles	"There is no compulsion in religion..." (Qur'an 2:256)	Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, "A person who seeks treatment, Allah provides a cure." (Sunan Abu Dawood 3855)	Patients may refuse treatment, but lifesaving interventions are encouraged unless explicitly forbidden.
Beneficence (Ihsan)	Acting in the patient's best interest, kindness in care	"And do good; indeed, Allah loves the doers of good." (Qur'an 2:195)	"The most beloved people to Allah are those who bring the most benefit to others." (Al-Mu'jam Al-Awsat 6192)	Islamic physicians are required to prioritise patient welfare and ethical practice.
Non-maleficence (La Darar)	Avoidance of harm to the patient	"And do not kill the soul which Allah has forbidden, except by right." (Qur'an 17:33)	"There should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm." (Sunan Ibn Majah 2340)	Harmful treatments should be avoided unless benefits outweigh risks (e.g., necessity in organ donation).
Justice (Adl)	Fair distribution of healthcare and equity in treatment	"Indeed, Allah commands justice and good conduct..." (Qur'an 16:90)	The Prophet (PBUH) established free healthcare in Bimaristans, ensuring justice in medical care ⁶ .	Healthcare should be available to all, as seen in historical Islamic hospitals (Bimaristans).