

Muslim doctors advanced ancient Greek medical knowledge with their own discoveries. The greatest of these doctors was al-Razi, who was born in 865 in what is today northern Iran. Early in life, he was interested in music, and played the oud (ood), an Arabic stringed instrument that is an ancestor of the modern guitar. Al-Razi later studied philosophy before turning to medicine. He soon became famous both for his skill as a doctor and the kindness with which he treated all his patients, rich and poor.

Practicing Medicine

Al-Razi's great knowledge of medicine was matched by his deep understanding of human nature. As a result, he sometimes took unusual approaches to patient care. One of his patients was a Muslim **emir**, or ruler, who was so ill he could no longer stand up. Treating just the emir's body had not worked.

So al-Razi decided to try using his patient's emotions to help him recover.

First, he had the emir soak in a hot bath for a long while to ease the joints in his legs. Then, al-Razi came in holding a knife in his hand and began to threaten his patient. Both frightened and very angry, the emir rose to his knees. When al-Razi continued his threats, his patient stood up straight. At this point, al-Razi ran outside and joined his servant, who had been waiting there with two fast horses. The two men mounted and rode off in a hurry. Al-Razi later wrote a letter to the emir explaining his shock treatment. The emir, who could now stand and walk, forgave him.

Al-Razi used his scientific learning to make important practical decisions. For example, when building a new hospital in Baghdad, in present-day Iraq, he believed that the location should be chosen scientifically. So he left pieces of meat in different sections of the city.

Baghdad was home to Razi's first hospital.



A diagram of the human eye from an Islamic medical text

He observed them over time. Al-Razi reasoned that the neighborhood where the meat took the longest to rot would be the healthiest. Sick people in a hospital located there would be more likely to get well. When the hospital was finally completed, he became its director.

Medical Writings

In between seeing his patients and running the hospital, al-Razi found time to write. He described how kidney stones develop and what doctors could do to treat them. He discussed diabetes and joint problems. Al-Razi also wrote about nutrition, stressing the importance of a balanced diet to preserve health.

Among his achievements was an influential book describing smallpox and measles. Al-Razi was also the first to identify the cause of hay fever. He noticed that some people experienced swelling inside their heads when roses

bloomed every year. He recognized that this was no coincidence. Apparently, the scent of roses caused the reaction. He concluded that there was something in plants that people inhaled that led to illness.

Al-Razi's greatest work, *The Comprehensive Book on Medicine*, started as a notebook for his own use. He included careful notes of his cases, as well as extracts from the writings of other doctors, to serve as a handy reference. After his death, his pupils put his notes in order and made them available to other doctors. Today, al-Razi's writings are one of the most important sources of information about Islamic medicine.

Late in life, al-Razi became blind. When another doctor suggested eye-surgery, he replied, "I have seen enough of this old world, and prefer not to suffer the ordeal of an operation for the hope of seeing more of it."

► For more information about Islamic science, see page 60.

WHY IT MATTERS TODAY

Al-Razi was very modern in his practice of medicine. He called for high professional standards, urging his fellow doctors to continue their medical educations. He also stressed the importance of a balanced diet to maintain or restore health.