

Perception of epilepsy in Muslim history; with current scenario

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The perception of epilepsy in the Muslim world can be viewed through three dimensions, i.e. Muslim religion and reference to epilepsy, epilepsy in Islamic medical literature, and the current perception of epilepsy in Muslim Countries.

THE MUSLIM RELIGION AND REFERENCE TO EPILEPSY

The basic belief-system in Islam includes the following concepts: There is one Creator of the Universe (God; “Allah” in Arabic). From among the humans, the Creator chooses suitable people to act as messengers (Prophets) who enact and exemplify the Divine Commandments in the cultural context. The divine Message is bestowed upon the prophets in the form of inspirations and orders, which on compilation have produced The Holy Books viz. The Torah, The Bible and The Quran. According to The Quran, Abraham was the first Muslim (“Muslim” meaning a person who submits and obeys totally to the commands of the Creator). The other prophets according to The Quran are being Moses, Christ, Solomon, Jacob, Joseph and many others (p.b.u.h). It is obligatory that all the prophets and The Holy Books must remain sacred for all Muslims.

The Holy Book bestowed upon Prophet Muhammad is The Holy Quran in which any word, which is equivalent of ‘Epilepsy’, is not written anywhere. It should be noted that The Holy Quran is not an inventory. It provides general guidelines/orders for everyday life, refers to the prophets before the Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h), and refers to a number of varied subjects like mathematics, biology, human embryology, geology, oceanography, astrology, physics, chemistry, sociology, judiciary, philosophy and many others.

In Hadith there is one recorded case of a female with epilepsy.¹

EPILEPSY IN ISLAMIC MEDICAL LITERATURE

During the nearly one thousand years of Muslim

history there have been numerous contributions to epilepsy literature by Arabs and Spanish Muslims. However, the most significant contribution was made by the most famous Persian physician, Avenicna (Ibn-Sinna; 980-1037 A.D). According to Lennox, Avenicna was the first person in medical history to use the term ‘Epilepsy’. Avenicna coined this term from a Latin verb meaning ‘being possessed by an outside force’. He wrote this in his book *Al-Qanoon-fil-Tibb* (‘The Cannon of Medicine’), which remained a standard textbook of medicine in Europe and Middle-East for nearly 400 years.² It appears that the continued use of the term to date ensues from Avenicna’s writings. It is interesting to note that both Avenicna and Hippocrates (as in his book ‘The Sacred Disease’) could not divorce their writings from the public-perception of a supernatural cause of this disorder.

Epilepsy in Arabic and Turkish languages is called ‘*Saraa*’ meaning ‘being knocked down’.¹ In Urdu language (India and Pakistan) epilepsy is called ‘*Mirgi*’ meaning ‘small death’.

Hospitals with special departments for psychically ill were established in Baghdad, Iraq as early as the 9th century A.D. A famous Arab physician, Ibn Rabbān at-Tabari (9th century) wrote a compendium of medicine which contained a chapter on brain diseases including epilepsy.³

The Unani (=Greek) system of medicine that came to India during the 1,000-year Muslim rule has been popular to date. According to this system all body functions are controlled by four humors (liquids in the body): *Dum* (sanguine, blood), *Balgham* (phlegm), *Safra* (yellow bile) and *Sauda* (black bile). Epilepsy is considered to result from a block in the roots of the nerves in the brain due to accumulation of vicious humors. Its treatment includes use of purgatives, vein-section, cleansing agents (*Jadwar-Ood-E-Salaib* and *Khamir-E-Abresham*), induced sneezing, hot oil massages with the *Roghan-E-Surkh* or *E-Baboona*. *Dana-Us-Shifa* has been used as an anticonvulsant. Finally brain ‘tonics’ like *Itherifal-Usta-Khudoos*, *Dawa-Ul-Misk* and *Muatidil Jawahar Wali* have also been given.⁴

The earliest recorded neurosurgical operations for epilepsy were carried out (on three patients with post-traumatic epilepsy) in 1891 by Dr. Karl Bayer in a Muslim Charitable Hospital named Vakufska Bolnica (founded in 1886) in Bosnia, Sarajevo. All three patients had suffered from epileptic fits caused by bone fragments in the brain. The operations consisted of craniotomy, removing of the bone fragments and closing the duramater. The patients were reported cured.⁵

CURRENT PERCEPTION OF EPILEPSY IN MUSLIMS

The perception of epilepsy varies in Muslim countries, according to the local cultural beliefs. In Nigeria, epilepsy is commonly thought to be contagious, even among medical students; hence persons with epilepsy are avoided.^{6,7} In Burkina Faso, Africa, epilepsy is considered to be contagious (by 44%) and hereditary (by 40%); while only 15% link it to a problem in the head and 7.8% think it being due to worms in the head.⁸ In Senegal, Africa, epilepsy is most frequently considered as a religious or magic mental affection.⁹ In Afghanistan most rural people think it is caused by djinn.¹⁰ A study in a largely rural Muslim population in Kelantan, Malaysia¹¹ showed 20% objected to their children associating with a person who sometimes had seizures, 48% objected to their children marrying someone who sometimes had seizures, and 58% thought that people with epilepsy should not be employed in jobs like other people. In another study among school teachers in Indonesia¹², where Muslim form the majority of population, 57% thought that epilepsy was a mental illness, and 20% thought that epilepsy was contagious.

In 1987, a population-based epidemiological study carried out simultaneously in Pakistan and Turkey on identical ICBERG protocol assessed the cross-cultural perception of epilepsy. Significantly more people in Pakistan than in Turkey considered epilepsy being not due to a supernatural cause and completely curable, and had treatment-seeking behaviour towards allopathic medicine.¹³

An interim report, more recently (Oct 2002 to Jan 2003), by Comprehensive Epilepsy Control Programme of Pakistan on Knowledge Attitude and Practice survey of epilepsy among 198 schoolteachers showed the perception of epilepsy being 'stress/tension of mind,' by 51%, 'abnormal electrical discharge in brain' by 38% and 'don't know' by 11%. However, significantly none

responded to positive for being caused by supernatural causes (possessed or magic). The perception of epilepsy score was 7.5 out of 15 (50%). There was no significant difference of age, gender or educational level.¹⁴

The relatively better current perception of epilepsy among Pakistanis may be attributed to the extensive public educational programmes carried out by the authors since 1980.

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