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Bioethics in Azerbaijan: History and Development of Bioethics in Azerbaijan

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History

Azerbaijan is a unique country with a centuries-old culture and history; it is a country located at the junction of Europe and Western Asia, uniting economic and cultural relationships between two continents and harmoniously combining the elements of various civilisations and cultures. Peculiarities of the historical development of Azerbaijan and its geographical location, as well as the ethnic composition of the population created an opportunity for the flourishing of various religions. Idolatry, fire worship, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and other religions were spread in the country during different periods. The multinational and confessional state (also known as a multicultural state), with its unique cultural inheritance, provided the opportunity not only to adhere to traditions and customs of previous generations, but also to develop spiritual-moral values that created respect and tolerance towards other religions. As a result of this cultural synthesis throughout the centuries, universal ethical values such as respecting the dignity of all persons, veneration of elderly people by youth, and principals of mercy, care and love to those in need and in the closing stages of life evolved. Numerous sources of ancient manuscripts bear witness that poetry, philosophy and the ethics of medical practice have always been part of the searching and thinking in medicine.

One of the ancient religions, Zoroastrianism, begins from fire worship and was revealed to the religious teacher and prophet Zoroaster (seventh century BC, Holy Book Zend-Avesta). According to the basic understandings of Zoroastrianism, there are two principles which are always contradictory—Kindness and Evil.

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Zoroaster called upon people to be fair and pure, to fight any kind of unfairness and disgracefulness.

The name of the healer Logman is covered with legends and is well known among different nations of the East. Across generations in Azerbaijan the name Logman has been used, inspiring the sharing of medical secrets and advice, cure of different illnesses and their prevention.[1] This is witnessed by the Logman Covenants. The first covenant warns of excessive consumption of alcohol and food, educating people in hygienic practices and developing that culture. Another covenant is dedicated to the high mission of the medic: "Every kindness on this planet created people. The kind beginning is there where you have a doctor."

The basic principles of humanitarian behaviour of the doctor have also been described in an ancient manuscript of Azerbaijani literature, the national epic "Kitabi-Dede Qorqud" (seventh century), which provides advice on how to maintain one's health in good condition, and the importance of spiritual purity, health and morals.

Outstanding philosophers, poets and scientists of the ancient land of Azerbaijan, such as Bakhmaniyar ibn Marzaban (eleventh century), Omar Osmanoglu (eleventh century), Khatib Tabrizi (1030–1109), Khagani (1120–99), Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209), Nakchivani (thirteenth century), Makhmud Shabustari (1287–1320), Seid YakhyaBakuvi (1410–62), Fizuli (1498–1556), Vagif (1717–97) and many others, described in their doctrines the difficult, selfless activities of doctors and the positive results and outcomes.[6]

Back in the eleventh[2] century, when madrasas or spiritual schools, where theology and medicine were taught and, ecclesiastics and *tabibs* (medics) were prepared and educated, a medical school was established in Azerbaijan's old capital Shamakha. Here, under the guidance of the most famous doctor and pharmacologist in all the East, Omar Osman oglu, training and education of medical workers took place. Having been widely educated, Omar Osman oglu was an adherent of the moral principles declared by Logman and taught his students that the main goal of any doctor's activities should be based on love towards the other person. His understanding of a medic's behaviour was contrary to major customs of that time, saying: "Don't deny your enemy. Heal him." Omar Osman oglu inspired his students to undertake spiritual pureness, patriotism and service to the nation. "Bring benefit to the nation, even if it is contrary with your personal benefit", "do not be egotistical", "do not try to find your way to heaven and do not be afraid of hell" were his slogans.

The famous poet Khagani (1120–99) continued the wonderful traditions of Omar Osman, stating: "If you would like your heart to be pure and clean as

the mirror, eliminate ten elements from it: greediness, hypocrisy, jealousy, slander, rage, pride, law disturbance, duplicity, enmity and falsehood."[4] An outstanding Azerbaijani poet and writer, Nizami, one of the advanced and educated people of the era, valued medicine and the medical profession highly. His works assessed the characteristics of different methods used in Azerbaijani medicine and presented numerous guidelines regarding food hygiene consumption that are still relevant.

Not many are aware of the fact that in Azerbaijan in the thirteenth century, a university—"Dar-esh-Shafa" (healing house)—educated 6,000–7,000 students annually. Scientists from Iran, India, China, Syria, Egypt and middle Asia were often guests at this university. The ancient capital of Azerbaijan attracted foreign scientists, not only with its wealth and luxuries, but also with the opportunity to implement fruitful scientific and pedagogical work.

Advanced views on medicine are described in numerous works by progressive philosophers of Azerbaijan such as Mirza Fatali Akhundov (1812–14), Hasan bey Zardabi, Nariman Narimanov, Jalil Mamedguluzada (1866–1932, known by his alias "Molla Nasraddin") and many others. Mirza Fatali Akhundov[3] created famous works in the fields of ethics, esthetics and the rule of natural science and medicine. While describing historical facts, customs and life, Mirza Fatali Akhundov[5] would always indicate the national customs that negatively affected the health of a person and his moral qualities. A dignified successor with strong beliefs in establishing better principles of morals was Hasanbey Malikov Zardabi (1842–1907). In his book *Hygiene* Zardabi recommends medics to pay attention to their personal hygiene and the hygiene of their patients and houses, to be more spiritual and purer inside, and to be a decent person.

It is well known that in the development of medical ethics, an important developmental factor is found in the social environment. The moral qualities of the medical worker are not innate, they are acquired. They occur and develop in the social environment where one grows, studies and continues to work. In her famous work "High mission", a well-known academician Z.A. Aliyeva (1923–85) has precisely described the key role of ethics in the professional activities of the doctor: "Medicine is developing on daily basis, it cannot avoid changes and there is only one constant—high moral and ethical professional conditions of the doctor."

Modern Developments

In 1997 an International Committee on Bioethics was formed under the initiative of UNESCO and as a result, national committees were established in Azerbaijan.

The presidium of the National Academy of Science of Azerbaijan (NASA) declared that it is vital to join the world movement of scientific societies in preparing regulations on bioethical issues while implementing biological and medical research and prepared a Committee on issues of bioethics and technological ethics under the patronage of the presidium of the National Academy of Science of Azerbaijan. As a result of the UN Declaration on the Genome and Human Rights, ratified on 24 March 1999 by the Decree of the Presidium of NASA, this Committee on Bioethics and Technological Ethics was formed.[9,1] In 2003 the question of ethics committees in the republic was developed, describing the structure and governance principles, as well as the rights and obligations of the members of the committees.

Currently, the Committee implements a wide scope of activities with regard to publicising moral-ethic norms and principles, and defending the basic rights of the citizens of Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, an integral contribution to the development of medical bioethics in Azerbaijan was realised under the initiative of the Committee of Ethics of Azerbaijan Pediatric Association (APA) by Professor Namazova A.A., docent of Azerbaijan Medical University, Taghi-zada T.Q., docent AMU and Huseynova Z.G. (initiative group), all academicians of the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan and Russian Academy of Medical Sciences.

Since 1998, we have studied and assessed a wide range of historical materials and international experience. Partnerships between NGOs and governmental bodies united the efforts to develop ethical education. In 1999 an initiative group in Azerbaijan has developed a method to successfully put into practice a programme of education for medics on the principles of modern ethics. In order to improve the quality of teaching and increase the awareness of students of biomedical ethics, the initiative group of Azerbaijan Medical University has developed an educational-methodical programme called "Introduction of educational materials on medical bioethics in higher educational institutions". The topic takes into account international experience and national traditions. With this goal, educational-methodical materials, including the first Azerbaijani textbook on medical ethics "Medical Ethics", as well as a number of methodical recommendations such as "Ethical principals in medicine", "Bioethical aspect of Euthanasia", "Deontology in medicine", "Vocabulary of medical bioethics" and other materials, were prepared by Professor Namazova A.A., docent Taghi-zada T.Q. and docent Huseynova Z.G.

In 2000, members of the initiative group together with international partners, held an international conference on "Methods of education of medical bioethics" in Baku. The goal was to train certified specialists to be experienced in research

and applied ethics, as well as to devise and prepare materials for education—methodical developments, textbooks, brochures and vocabularies on bioethical terminology.

In 2000, a course on biomedical ethics was introduced at Azerbaijan Medical University, where approximately 8,000 students-medics are educated. Issues of biomedical ethics were integrated in all courses, especially clinical, reflected by additional "problem-based" lectures. At the same time, special hours for the biomedical ethic course were set aside in the educational programme, methodical materials were prepared and all the lecturers were trained. In addition, medical personnel in the republic were surveyed to evaluate the level of awareness and knowledge on legal aspects of bioethics. These sociological surveys determined the direction of further activities.

In 2005–06 the initiative group, together with specialists from the Ministry of Health of the Azerbaijan Republic and international experts of the European Council and the USA undertook several activities for developing and implementing Standard Operational Procedures.

From 2001 to 2008, under the patronage of Professor Kubar O.I. and Professor Yudin B.G., an invaluable contribution in the development of bioethics and international cooperation by the initiative group of Azerbaijan Medical University with organisations and specialists of international scope (WHO, CIOMS, TDR, etc) was organised, thanks to the assistance of members of Forum of Committees of CIS. This resulted in training of personnel for teaching, standard procedural protocols for ethic committees and suggestions on the adaptation and integration of international standards of biomedicine. Experts from the Forum of Committees of CIS organised and held joint sessions with EC/APA and members of the "Permanent Commission of Interparliamentary Assembly of the Countries—members of the CIS" (2004) on the topic of a model law "Human Rights and dignity—members of biomedical studies". Afterwards, the current law was presented and discussed in a session of Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan, with the participation of advanced experts in the field of human rights.

In 2007, the Forum of Committees of CIS with the support of UNESCO and with the participation of the initiative group and experts from other countries implemented vital work to investigate the scope of ethical expertise of biomedical research and teaching of medical ethics in the CIS countries. As a result of this research, several publications (two books) were published in the form of an analytical survey, with recommendations on the training of the basic educational programme of UNESCO in Azerbaijan. By joining the Forum of Committees on ethics of the countries-members of the CIS, we had a great

opportunity to exchange information on various achievements with advanced specialists in the sphere of bioethics, law and education. Our connection and cooperation with Forum continues.

In 2011 the report of the initiative group on the subject of the development of bioethics in Azerbaijan was presented at the 18th session of UNESCO, held in Baku. Experts have also been reporting on the educational activities in bioethics at the International Humanitarian Forum and other international sessions.

Currently one can discuss the development of medical ethics in the sphere of medical knowledge. While taking into account a rich historical heritage and current modern opportunities, the initiative continues the study and development of medical bioethics within the scope of the education of medical personnel in Azerbaijan.

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