

## Letter to the Editors

## The Writing of Iranian Medical History

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Dear Editors,

It has come to my notice that in recent years, several young writers of Iranian Medical History have tended to exaggerate the achievements of ancient Iranian physicians and have attributed to them discoveries for which there is no factual evidence. This kind of false glorification is unwarranted when there are genuine but more modest historical achievements to be justly proud of. Furthermore, these authors 'quote' references which are pure fabrications on the part of the authors and the original sources do not contain such statements. A corollary of such a practice is that unsubstantiated statements become repeated and copied in subsequent writings of one article to the next and so these untruths become established in the literature as 'factoids'.

I shall give three examples of such a practice to illustrate the problems which we face:

1) There is a "quotation" from Arthur Christensen's book 'Iran under the Sassanians', recounting the journey of seven Greek philosophers to Seleucia-Ctesiphon after the Roman Emperor Justinian had closed the school of Athens, whom Khosro I Anoushiravan welcomed and later guaranteed their safe return home. However, the statement "The Persian king welcomed them and made them teachers at Jundishapur University" does not occur in Christensen's book and thus, it is a total fabrication where no such source reference exists to this effect. This untruth has been repeated in several articles which have referred back to the first fabrication.

2) The second example concerns Borzuyeh Tabib. Even if he were a real person during the reign of Khosro I Anoushiravan and not an invention by Ibn Moqaffa in his 'Babe Borzuyeh' added by him to 'Kalileh va Demneh', there is no primary source reference that he was a 'Drustbed and that he taught at Gondeshapur'. Even in the 'Babe Borzuyeh' which is purportedly his biography, there is no mention of such an event, nor is it mentioned in Ferdowsi's Shahname!

3) A further pitfall which must be avoided is where words in Farsi may have several meanings and the authors choose the meaning

which accords with their own interpretation and bias. There is a passage in the Farsi translation of Ibn Sina's 'Cannon' (volume two, second *gofar*) where the first sentence contains two key words; 'moghayesseh' translated from the Arabic word 'gheias' and 'azmayesh' translated from the Arabic word 'Tajrobeh'. Both these words in Farsi have nuanced meanings and must be interpreted in their correct context. 'Tajrobeh' in this context is 'experience' rather than 'experiment', as Ibn Sina is describing drug effectiveness from his past *experience* and observations, which is basically empirical medicine as practiced throughout the ages, but is a far cry from a scientifically controlled clinical trial as some recent authors have claimed and should not be interpreted as such.

A less malignant, but nonetheless unethical practice is that several young Iranian writers of medical history have formed networks composed of several authors, to publish a simple descriptive life history or achievements of an ancient Iranian physician, usually 1-3 pages including some pictures. The material is culled from one or two medical history books or encyclopedias. These publications involve no extensive research and certainly do not require the efforts of 3-4 authors. Within the introduction, they give several references, after simple short sentences, to their own previous articles, usually amounting to 3-10 such self-citations, in order to expand the authors' citation rate with a geometrical progression. The making of banal statements such as "The history of medicine in Persia dates back to thousands of years...." does not require a reference to the authors' previous article!

Such examples of abuse of medical historiography abound in recent literature.

To invent history is, of course, just as fraudulent as to invent science.

The honor of Iranian writers of science and medical history is at stake. It is imperative that we practice judicious self-criticism and censorship in order to stem the tide of fraudulent malpractice for which young Iranian writers are becoming infamous in world academic circles.

A little effort in searching for valid primary sources and a judicious interpretation of secondary sources might be more honest than fraudulent invention of history.

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