

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Unani Medical Theory in Principle, Part 2—The *Vis Medicatrix Naturae*

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ABSTRACT

Unani medicine is an organic synthesis of Greek, Arabic, and Islamic medical knowledge. It enjoys vast popularity in certain parts of the world, and the World Heritage Center, part of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the United Nations Foundation list it as an authentic and still-living form of traditional medicine. Despite these facts, contemporary Western cultures know very little about this ancient form of primary health care.

This article is Part 2 of a three-part series. Part 1 highlighted the historical and civilizational beginnings of this medicine while it also investigated the Arabic and Islamic

worlds' subsequent transformation of it into the Unani medicine practiced today. Part 1 also presented a brief primer on the rich philosophical and spiritual framework defining Unani medicine.

In Part 2 of this article, the author provides some summary remarks about Unani medicine's governing principles and theories, such as the concept of the humors.

Finally, Part 3 will focus on illustrating facets of this medicine's classical and contemporary translations into clinical practice, with further discussion about its various modes of natural therapeutics.

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Doctors of Unani medicine can visualize the state of a patient's subtle body (*jism al-latīf*) properly only through the eye of the heart (*ayn al-qalb*), wherein the flowing, dynamic streams of humors lie. The doctor (*hakīm*) enlivens the patient's self-healing power or vital force (the *vis medicatrix naturae*), at the level of the subtle body to move him or her toward health and wellness. A particular organizing principle of the hidden physiology of the subtle body (*al-quwwa al-mudabbirah*) effects a harmonizing reaction in the face of disease or illness. One can perceive the *vis medicatrix naturae* as the thread that holds together the fabric of the human body, mind, and soul in close collaboration with the spirit. Unani medicine posits the general medical theory of the healing power of nature as a guiding principle upon which it builds more complex, specific understandings of human health and disease.

Various medical systems around the world offer their own understandings of the primary and essential functional components that cause health to reign or disease to take root, progress, and finally show itself in constellations of signs and symptoms of illness. Chinese medicine promotes physiologic concepts such as *qi*, *blood*, *yin*, and *yang*. In conventional medicine, key concepts relating to body tissues and fluid dynamics dominate the understanding of physiology.



Figure 1. Illustrates the *vis medicatrix naturae*, the invisible healing power of nature for grounding and balancing the body, mind, and spirit.

Unani medicine's key concepts fall under the strict heading of the principles of natural physiology (*umūr al-tabī'īyyah*), and they comprise seven natural components, forming the Doctrine of the Seven Naturals. These components make up the basic knowledge required to understand the physiological systems that determine health or disease. These components include (1) elements (*arkān*), (2) temperaments (*mizāj*), (3) humors (*akhlāt*), (4) organs (*aḍā'*), (5) forces, drives, faculties, or powers (*quwwāt*), (6) actions or functions (*af'āl*), and (7) pneuma or spirit substance (*rūh*).

THE DOCTRINE OF THE SEVEN NATURALIS

Elements, Qualities, Properties, States

The seven elements are the simple building blocks of matter in nature, including the human body. They are nondivisible but do have qualities that are active and passive. These properties determine the states of matter. They include (1) fire (*nār*), which is hot and dry (*hār* and *yābis*) and determines the energy state; (2) air (*hawā*), which is hot and wet (*hār* and *ratab*) and determines the gaseous state; (3) water (*mā*), which is cold and wet (*bārid* and *ratab*) and determines the liquid state; and (4) earth (*ardh*), which is cold and dry (*bārid* and *yābis*) and determines the solid state.

The seven elements do not mean literally the presence of clods of dirt, buckets of water, and so forth. Hakim Chishti states, “Likewise, the burning fire that we see is not the element fire, (but) is really the potentiality of fire within the substance.”¹

Temperaments

The interplay between the qualities of the elements leads ultimately to a uniform configuration of temperament. David Osborn says, “Each one (temperament) is named after a certain humor and is characterized by the predominance of that humor and its associated basic qualities.”² The classical temperaments correlate well to today’s psychological types of constitutions: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic. Imbalances of temperaments cause disharmony, especially on the mental and emotional fronts. Tables 1 through 4 offer concise but thorough medical depictions of the temperaments:

Humors

The principle of the humors (*akhlāt*) no doubt originated with the father of medicine, Hippocrates, who described the concept in his book *Tabī‘at al-Insān*.³ Upon examination of blood, he observed: (1) the red portion of fresh blood is the blood humor (*dam*), corresponding to the sanguine temperament; (2) the white material mixed with blood is the phlegm humor (*balgham*), related to the phlegmatic temperament; (3) the yellow froth on top is the yellow-bile humor (*safra*),

Table 1. Sanguine Temperament

Humor	Blood
Basic Qualities	Hot and wet
Face	Oval or acorn-shaped face and head. Delicate, well-formed mouth and lips. Beautiful almond-shaped eyes, often brown. An elegant, swanlike neck.
Physique	In youth, balanced, neither too fat nor too thin. Moderate frame and build. Elegant, statuesque form, with ample, luxuriant flesh. Joints well-formed; bones, tendons, veins not prominent. Can put on weight past 40, mostly around hips, thighs, and buttocks.
Hair	Thick, luxuriant, wavy. Abundant facial and body hair in men.
Skin	Pink, rosy, blushing complexion. Soft, creamy smooth, with a luxurious feel. Pleasantly warm to the touch.
Appetite	Quite hearty, often greater than digestive capacity. A predilection for rich gourmet foods.
Digestion	Good to moderate; balanced. Can be overwhelmed by excessive food.
Metabolism	Moderate, balanced. Bowel tone can be a bit lax.
Predispositions	Metabolic excesses of the blood. Uremia, gout, diabetes, high cholesterol. Intestinal sluggishness, putrefaction. Congested, sluggish liver and pancreas. Congested blood, bleeding disorders. Respiratory catarrh, congestion, asthma. Urinary conditions, genito-urinary disorders. Excessive menstruation in women. Skin conditions, hypersensitivity, capillary congestion.
Urine	Tends to be rich or bright yellow and thick.
Stool	Well-formed, neither too hard nor too soft.
Sweat	Balanced, moderate.
Sleep	Moderate, balanced, sound. Can have some snoring.
Dreams	Usually pleasant, of a charming, amusing, romantic nature. Travel, enjoyment, games, distractions.
Mind	Faculty of judgment well-developed. A synthetic intellect that likes to see the whole picture. An optimistic, positive mental outlook. Rather conventional and conformist; good social skills.
Personality	Exuberant, enthusiastic, outgoing. Optimistic, confident, poised, graceful. Expansive, generous. Romantically inclined; loves beauty, aesthetics, arts. Sensual, indulgent nature. Sociable, gregarious, light-hearted, cheerful.

Table 2. Choleric Temperament

Humor	Yellow bile
Basic Qualities	Hot and dry
Face	Broad jaw. Sharp nose, high cheekbones. Sharp, angular facial features. Reddish face common. Sharp, fiery, brilliant, penetrating eyes and head.
Physique	Compact, lean, wiry. Good muscle tone and definition. Prominent veins and tendons. Broad chest common. An active, sportive type. Weight gain usually in chest, arms, belly, upper body.
Hair	Often curly. Can also be thin, fine. Balding common in men. Blonde or reddish hair common.
Skin	Ruddy or reddish color if heat predominates; sallow or bright yellow if bile predominates. Rough and dry, quite warm.
Appetite	Sharp and quick. Soon overcome by ravenous hunger. Fond of meat, fried foods, salty or spicy foods, alcohol, intense or stimulating taste sensations.
Digestion	Sharp and quick. Tendency towards gastritis, hyperacidity, acid reflux. When balanced and healthy, can have a cast-iron stomach, able to digest anything.
Metabolism	Strong, fast, active; catabolic dominant. Strong innate heat of metabolism. Liver and bile metabolism can be problematic. Digestive secretions strong, bowel transit time short. Adrenals, sympathetic nervous system dominant. Strong inflammatory reactions.
Predispositions	Fevers, infections, inflammation. Hives, rashes, urticaria. Fatty liver, bilious conditions. Hyperacidity, acid reflux, inflammatory and ulcerative conditions of middle GI tract. Headaches, migraines, irritability. Eyestrain, red sore eyes. Purulent conditions. High cholesterol, cardiovascular disorders. Gingivitis. Bleeding disorders from excess heat, cholera in the blood. Hypertension, stress.
Urine	Tends to be scanty, dark, and thin. Can be hot or burning.
Stool	Tends towards diarrhea, loose stools. Can have a yellowish color, foul odor.
Sweat	Profuse, especially in summer or with vigorous physical activity. Strong body odor. Sensitive to hot weather, suffers greatly in summer.
Sleep	Often fitful, restless; disturbed, especially with stress; indigestion. Often tends to wake up early, or in the middle of the night.
Dreams	Often of a military or violent nature. Dreams of fire, red things common. Fight or flight, confrontation.
Mind	Bold, daring, original, imaginative, visionary. Ideation faculty well-developed. Brilliant intellect, sharp penetrating insight. The idea man who prefers to leave the details to others.
Personality	Prone to anger, impatience, irritability; short temper. Bold, courageous, audacious; confrontational, contentious. Dramatic, bombastic manner; high-powered personality. The rugged individualist and pioneer; thrives on challenge. The fearless leader. Seeks exhilaration, intense experiences. Driven, "Type A" personality. Prone to extremism, fanaticism.

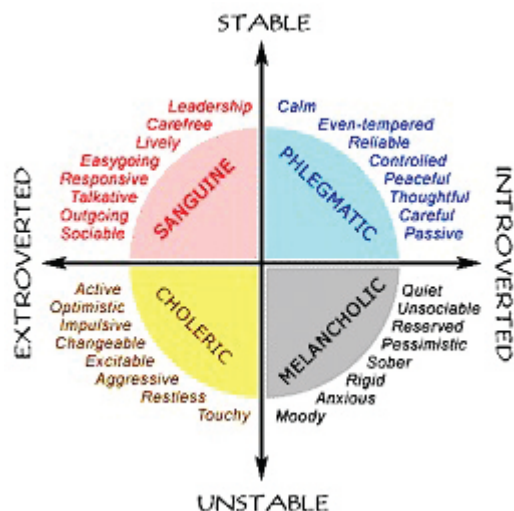
Table 3. Melancholic Temperament

Humor	Black bile
Basic Qualities	Cold and dry
Face	Square or rectangular head and face. Prominent cheekbones, sunken hollow cheeks common. Small, beady eyes. Teeth can be prominent, crooked or loose. Thin lips.
Physique	Tends to be thin, lean. Knobby, prominent bones and joints common. Prominent veins, sinews, tendons. Muscle tone good but tends to be stiff, tight. Rib cage long and narrow, with ribs often prominent. Can gain weight in later years, mainly around midriff.
Hair	Color dark, brunette. Thick and straight. Facial and body hair in men tends to be sparse.
Skin	A dull yellow or darkish, swarthy complexion. Feels coarse, dry, leathery, cool. Calluses common.
Appetite	Variable to poor. Varies, fluctuates according to mental or emotional state.
Digestion	Variable to poor; irregular. Digestion also varies according to mental or emotional state. Colic, gas, distension, bloating common.
Metabolism	Often slow. Can also be variable, erratic. Prone to dehydration. Nervous system consumes many nutrients, minerals. GI function variable, erratic; digestive secretions tend to be deficient. Blood tends to be thick. Nutritional deficiencies can cause a craving for sweets, starches. Thyroid tends to be challenged, stressed.
Predispositions	Anorexia, poor appetite. Nervous, colicky digestive disorders. Constipation. Spleen disorders. Nutritional and mineral deficiencies, anemia. Blood sugar problems, hypoglycemia. Wasting, emaciation, dehydration. Poor circulation and immunity. Arthritis, rheumatism, neuromuscular disorders. Nervous and spasmodic afflictions. Dizziness, vertigo, ringing in ears. Nervousness, depression, anxiety, mood swings.
Urine	Tends to be clear and thin.
Stool	Can either be hard, dry, compact; or irregular, porous, club-shaped. Constipation, irritable bowel common.
Sweat	Generally scanty. Can be subtle, thin, furtive, indicating poor immunity. Nervous stress can increase sweating.
Sleep	Difficulty falling asleep, insomnia. Stress, overwork, staying up late aggravates insomnia. Generally a light sleeper.
Dreams	Generally dark, moody, somber, disturbing. Themes of grief or loss common.
Mind	An analytical intellect; detail oriented. Efficient, realistic, pragmatic. Reflective, studious, philosophical. Retentive faculty of memory well-developed. Thinking can be too rigid, dogmatic. A prudent, cautious, pessimistic mental outlook.
Personality	Practical, pragmatic, realistic. Efficient, reliable, dependable. A reflective, stoic, philosophical bent. Can be nervous, high strung. Frugal, austere; can be too attached to material possessions. Serious, averse to gambling, risk-taking. Can be moody, depressed, withdrawn. Can easily get stuck in a rut. Excessive attachment to status quo.

Table 4. Phlegmatic Temperament

Humor	Phlegm
Basic Qualities	Cold and wet
Face	Round face; full cheeks, often dimpled. Soft, rounded features. Double chin, pug nose common. Large, moist eyes. Thick eyelids and eyelashes.
Physique	Heavy frame, stout, with flesh ample and well-developed. Often pudgy, plump or overweight; obesity common. Joints dimpled, not prominent. Veins not prominent, but can be bluish and visible. Lax muscle tone common. Feet and ankles often puffy, swollen. Women tend to have large breasts. Weight gain especially in lower body.
Hair	Light colored, blondish hair common. Light facial and body hair in men.
Skin	Pale, pallid complexion; very fair. Soft, delicate, cool moist skin. Cool, clammy perspiration common, especially in hands and feet.
Appetite	Slow but steady. Craves sweets, dairy products, starchy glutinous foods.
Digestion	Slow but steady to sluggish. Gastric or digestive atony common. Sleepiness, drowsiness after meals common.
Metabolism	Cold, wet, and slow. Conserves energy, favors anabolic metabolism. Congestion, poor circulation, especially in veins and lymphatics. Kidneys slow, hypofunctioning, inefficient. Adrenals and thyroid tend towards hypofunction; basal metabolism low. Metabolic Water drowning out Metabolic Fire.
Predispositions	Phlegm congestion. Water retention, edema. Lymphatic congestion, obstruction. Poor venous circulation. Gastric atony, slow digestion. Hypothyroid, myxedema. Adrenal hypofunction. Weight gain, obesity. Frequent colds and flu. Chronic respiratory conditions, congestion. Swollen legs, ankles, feet. Cellulite. Poor tone of skin, muscles, and fascia.
Urine	Tends to be clear or pale and thick. Tends to be scanty in volume, with excess fluid accumulation in the body.
Stool	Well-formed, but tends to be slightly loose, soft. Bowels tend to be sluggish.
Sweat	Cool, clammy sweat common, especially on hands and feet. Sweating can be easy and profuse, especially with kidney hypofunction. Sensitive to cold weather; suffers greatly in winter.
Sleep	Very deep and sound. Tends towards excessive sleep, somnolence. Snoring common; can be loud or excessive.
Dreams	Generally very languid, placid. Water and aquatic themes common.
Mind	Tends to be dull, foggy, and slow. Slow to learn but once something learned, excellent and long retention. Patient, devoted, faithful. Faculty of empathy well-developed. Sentimental, subjective thinking. A calm, good-natured, benevolent mental outlook.
Personality	Good-natured, benevolent, kind. Nurturing, compassionate, sympathetic, charitable. Great faith, patience, devotion; tends to be religious, spiritual. Sensitive, sentimental, emotional, empathetic. Passive, slow, sluggish; averse to exertion or exercise. Calm, relaxed, takes life easy. Excessive sluggishness can lead to depression.

Figure 2. Demonstrates the four humors in the psychological profile



corresponding to the choleric temperament; and (4) the heavy part that sediments down is the black-bile humor (*sauda*), related to the melancholic temperament.¹

The blood humor associated with the sanguine temperament is not identical to the blood that phlebotomists draw nor is the phlegm the same physical phlegm that the lungs produce. Cameron Gruner, MD, called them quasi-material or what some have termed semigaseous vapors.¹

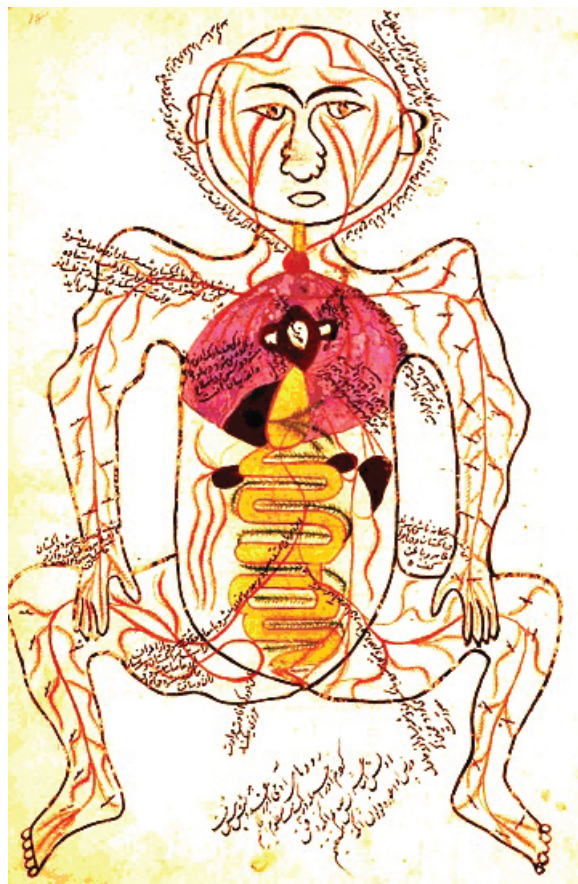
Similarly, *Qi* in traditional Chinese medicine is beyond physical or corporeal form. *Qi* and the seven naturals are best understood as formless substance, often referred to in the language of philosophy as a Platonic form or idea.¹ Ultimately, practitioners of both systems understand that true “health is a harmony of (these) humors.”¹

Organs

This component in the Doctrine of the Seven Naturals includes four primary organs that the other organs support and that may enlist other organs’ help: (1) the heart, the seat of vital power and heat; (2) the brain, the seat of sensations and movements; (3) the liver, the seat of all vegetative, nutritive, and eliminative powers; and (4) the gonads, the seat of generative capacity for reproduction of the species.

When considering an approach that focuses on health, wellness, and prevention, the medical traditions of antiquity all agree that the two most important organs needing care are the liver and the colon. Modern medicine focuses on the heart and the brain, for good reason, as demonstrated in acute-care settings. Miracles occur every day in emergency rooms, operating rooms, trauma-care facilities, burn units, ambulances, life-flight transportation, etc. In his previously mentioned handbook, Chishti says, “In fact, emergency medicine is one of the most legitimate and

Figure 3. Mansūr ibn Ilyās’s 14th-century work on anatomy contained illustrated chapters on five systems of the body: bones, nerves, muscles, veins, and arteries. The page shown depicts the arteries with the internal organs shown in watercolors.



impressive achievements of (modern) orthodox medicine.”¹

Forces, Energies, Faculties, Drives, or Powers

The ground work of energies that animate the seven naturals are termed *forces* or *faculties* (*quwwāt*). These forces are the legitimate activating principles for the functioning of the humors. Without the *quwwāt*, no accomplishment of organ function or anything else could occur. Primarily, these three faculties give rise to a variety of functions.

The natural (from the world of nature) or vegetative faculty (*quwwah tabī-yyah*). This faculty governs the nutritive power of the liver and the reproductive powers of the generative organs.

i. An excellent discussion concerning the notions of *physical, corporeal, Platonic forms or ideas*, and *energy or quantum* entities within the context of many traditional cultural and spiritual knowledge frameworks, please read *The Quantum Enigma* and other works by Wolfgang Smith, physicist and Christian Scholastic philosopher.

The vital or animal faculty (*quwwah haywāniyyah*).

This faculty is responsible for preserving the integrity of the vital force.

The psychic or soul faculty (*quwwah nafsāniyyah*).

This faculty controls the brain and the rational faculty. In *Islamic Science: An Illustrated Study*, Seyyed Hossein Nasr says, "It is of significance to note that in Arabic, as in many other languages, the words for breath (*nafas*) and soul (*nafs*) are related. Therein lies a profound cosmological principle that also is related to the invocation of the name of God (*Dhikr*) as the central technique of Sufism for spiritual realization."⁴

Actions or Functions

Actions or *Functions* (*af'āl*) are the manifesting activities of the above-mentioned humoral or organ powers. The *functions* ultimately are the by-products of the will or power of the humors and organs. For example, the heart's function is to beat; the stomach's function is to receive food and drink and prepare it for further digestive processing; the brain's function is to receive stimuli, with a higher functioning related to allowing the expression of reason and thought, etc.

Pneumata or Spirits

The *spirit* (*rūh*) is the other-worldly vehicle for the transmission of the divine spark of life force, a heavenly command. In his previously mentioned study, Nasr indicates that the command "descends upon this mixture of the humors and is the subtle body standing intermediate between the physical body comprised of the humors and the force of life that comes from the world above. It is worth drawing attention to the similarity between the words *rūh* (spirit) and *rīh* (the wind or air) in Arabic."⁴ The study also indicates,

In its medical sense according to Muslim physiologists and following Galen, the spirit or *rūh* is of three kinds: (1) the vital spirit is hot and dry, with its center in the left ventricle of the heart, and it preserves life; causes the body to grow, move and reproduce; and travels within the arteries; (2) the psychic spirit is cold and wet, with its center in the brain, and it causes sensation and movement and moves within the nerves; (3) the natural spirit is hot and wet, with its center in the liver, and it is concerned with the reception of food, growth, and reproduction and travels within the veins.⁴

Thus, an association also exists between physical health and spirituality, even in the usage of terminology in Unani medicine. The Traditional Medicine Network states,

According to some of his writings and in keeping with the Hermetic Tradition, Avicenna (also known as Ibn Sina) sees these natural laws as embodying a component of divine creative perfection, which to him explains the tendency inherent in natural systems to direct themselves toward a point of balance or equilibrium.⁵

THE SIX ESSENTIAL CAUSES

To understand the physiology and pathology of the Doctrine of the Seven Naturals, practitioners also must answer the question "to what end?" The answer involves achieving a healthy constitution for every patient by meeting the goals of the six essential causes of health (*al-asbāb al-sittah al-dharūriyyah*):³ (1) air, (2) food and drink, (3) body movement and repose, (4) mental movement and repose, (5) sleeping habits, and (6) retention and evacuation.

These basic causal pillars ultimately guide the *hakīm* toward satisfying the criteria for each individual's health as set forth by Avicenna himself in his *Canon of Medicine*, as follows⁶: (1) the complexion is pleasing, with shades and color that are normal to the respective biological environment; (2) the body build is medium, neither too lean nor too heavy; (3) the hair is neither too profuse nor too scanty; (4) the feel of the body is balanced with respect to heat, cold, moisture, and dryness; (5) sleep and wakefulness are moderate; (6) movements are free and easy; (7) intellectual functions and memory are good; (8) habits and behavior are balanced between timidity and assertiveness, anger and calm, leniency and harshness, humor and seriousness, and pride and humility; (9) growth and repair is rapid whereas deterioration is slow; (10) dreams are interesting and pleasing; (11) food is enjoyable; (12) digestion and assimilation occurs normally; and (13) excretory functions are regular.

TECHNIQUES OF INQUIRY AND ASSESSMENT

The Pulse

As a science in Unani medicine, pulse diagnosis takes tremendous practice and sensitivity to the characteristics of 10 physical characteristics of the radial pulse¹: (1) the quality of its expansion: length, width, and depth; (2) the quality of its impact: strong, weak, or moderate; (3) the duration of its cycle: fast, slow, or moderate; (4) the duration of its pause: successive, different, or moderate; (5) the time between its beats: full, empty, or moderate; (6) its compressibility: hard, soft, or moderate; (7) its perspiration: full, empty, or moderate; (8) its regularity; (9) its order and disorder: ordered, irregular, or irregularly disordered; and (10) its rhythm: similar, different, or out of rhythm.

According to Shahid Athar, Avicenna's pulse diagnosis was so profound that he even:

...recognized physiological psychology in treating illnesses involving emotions. From the clinical perspective Ibn Sina developed a system for associating changes in the pulse rate with inner feelings, which has been viewed as predating the word association test of Jung. He is said to have treated a seriously ill patient by feeling the patient's pulse and reciting aloud to him the names of provinces, districts, towns, streets, and people. By noticing how the patient's pulse quickened when names were mentioned, Ibn Sina deduced that the patient was in love with a girl whose home Ibn Sina was able to locate by the digital [pulse] examination. The man took Ibn Sina's advice, married the girl, and recovered from his illness.⁷

Uroscopy and the Urine Wheel

Unani medicine demonstrated sophistication in realizing that practitioners can gain much legitimate insight and wisdom through the macroscopic study of urine (often termed uroscopy) and stool, as they are tissues of the body that reveal the body's internal metabolic terrain and activity. For example, *hakims* used *urine wheels* to move forward assumptions about diagnosis or prognosis, treating urine essentially as a "liquid window through which physicians felt they could view the body's inner workings."⁸ Also, *hakims* use macroscopic stool analysis to

diagnose humoral imbalances, thus permitting appropriate recommendations for therapy.

CONCLUSION

The Doctrine of the Seven Naturals, as described, offers the *hakim* a system for observation and interpretation of the state of the subtle body. This assessment can be used to guide therapy that promotes the *vis medicatrix naturae* in order to move the patient toward health and wellness. A discussion of how this assessment relates to practice within the tenets of Unani medicine is addressed in Part 3 of this article.

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ii. Modern-day urine wheel literature and digital images of facsimiles of ancient uroscopy from European manuscripts can be found at http://www.mja.com.au/public/issues/189_11_011208/dis11493_fm.html.



Figure 4. Shows an example of a urine wheel^{9,ii} from the 14th century, typically carried in a physician's belt with diagrams of differently colored urine (pictured here in glass flasks with different colors of fluid contained in them) and their associated prognoses.