

CHAPTER
10

HISTORYMAKERS **Al-Razi**
Compassionate Physician

Section 3

"Medicine is a philosophy. . ."—Al-Razi, *Doubts Concerning Galen*

Al-Razi brought intelligence and a deep compassion for people to philosophy and to the practice of medicine. A bold thinker, he challenged authority and sought the truth regardless of where it led him. One of the leading physicians of his time, he influenced many future generations.

Al-Razi was born around 854 in the town of Rayy, located in present-day Iran. As a philosopher, he often challenged traditional thinking. He strongly believed that humans were capable of rational thought and could use it to gain knowledge and better themselves. He rejected the idea that people could be grouped as better or worse according to inborn qualities. He did not believe in a society with a social hierarchy.

Al-Razi also renounced religious leadership. Though a Muslim, he argued that religious leaders used tricks to fool people. Scientists, he said, were better for humanity than prophets, because science was based on reason while religion led to hatred and violence.

Though Al-Razi held scientists in high esteem, this did not prevent him from disputing their theories. He wrote *Doubts Concerning Galen*, which challenged the findings of this famous Greek physician. Specifically, he questioned Galen's writings about fevers. Al-Razi wrote that he had seen as many patients who did not show the symptoms that Galen described as those who did.

Al-Razi also remained open to new ideas. In one book, he criticized those people who reject new concepts simply because they do not know how to prove them. He used an analogy to make his point. If someone were to write that a stone had been found that could attract copper or glass, that person would be dismissed. Yet, Al-Razi notes, everyone accepts the fact that a magnet can attract iron.

Al-Razi believed that science could move forward by building on the foundation of past work. As a result, he began an encyclopedia of medicine that his students completed after his death. It eventually filled 24 volumes. This work later found its way into western Europe, where it shaped medical practice.

It was in medicine that Al-Razi's sharp scientific mind was most evident. He made careful observations of his patients, noting how one case differed from another. He traveled widely, from Persia to as far west as Spain, learning as much as he could about disease and possible cures. He wrote the first scientific study of smallpox, carefully describing who is most prone to the disease and how and when it affects the body. His suggestions for treatment were based on the age and condition of the patient. He also studied powders, oils, and other substances that could be used as drugs and collected information about possible medicines. As a result, he became one of the leading figures of early pharmacology, which is the science of drugs.

Al-Razi became so well-known as a skilled and compassionate physician that his ruler asked him to start a new hospital in Baghdad. Al-Razi tried to make his patients feel comfortable. During their stay in the hospital, they could hear music, storytellers, and people who recited passages from the Qur'an. Furthermore, he did not charge poor people when he treated them. In fact, he often paid their hospital bills out of his own pocket. As a result, when he died, either in 925 or 935, he was a poor man.

Al-Razi believed that medicine could do much to end suffering, but he did not think that physicians could cure every disease. He warned doctors to avoid making false promises to patients. His view of medicine seemed to be to use knowledge to help those who could be cured and to relieve the suffering of those who could not.

Questions

1. **Recognizing Main Idea** What accepted authorities did Al-Razi question?
2. **Drawing Conclusions** What views did Al-Razi have that could have put him in conflict with political and religious authorities?
3. **Recognizing Facts and Details** Give two examples of Al-Razi's compassion.