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Understanding disease in Unani medicine: A comparative review of Su-e-Mizaj and modern pathophysiological mechanisms

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Abstract

Unani medicine attributes disease to a fundamental disturbance in the balance of Mizaj (temperament), termed Su-e-Mizaj, which reflects an imbalance in the qualitative states of the body—hot, cold, moist, and dry. In contrast, modern biomedical science views disease primarily as the result of dysfunction at the cellular or molecular level, including genetic mutations, immune dysregulation, or metabolic imbalances. This comparative review aims to explore how both systems conceptualize disease onset and progression, highlighting parallels and divergences. Bridging the holistic perspective of Unani medicine with reductionist biomedical models offers a broader understanding of disease causation and opens possibilities for integrative therapeutic strategies.

Keywords: Unani medicine, Su-e-Mizaj, disease, temperament

1. Introduction

Unani medicine presents a holistic understanding of health and disease grounded in the balance of Mizaj (temperament). Disease, or Marz, results from a disturbance of this balance, termed Su-e-Mizaj. In contrast, modern pathophysiology focuses on biochemical, cellular, and molecular disruptions. While seemingly different in methodology and terminology, both systems aim to trace the origins of disease and guide effective interventions. This paper compares the etiopathogenesis outlined in Unani texts with contemporary pathophysiological models.

2. Concept of Disease in Unani Medicine

2.1 Su-e-Mizaj (Abnormal Temperament)

According to Unani scholars like Ibn Sina and Galen, the human body is composed of four humours (Akhlāt): Dam (blood), Balgham (phlegm), Safra (yellow bile), and Sauda (black bile). These are governed by four qualities—hot, cold, moist, and dry. When their balance is disturbed, it results in Su-e-Mizaj, a pathological temperament. This can be simple (e.g., hot-only) or compound (e.g., hot and dry), and localized (in an organ) or generalized (whole body).

2.2 Types of Su-e-Mizaj

- Har (Hot) Mizaj — leads to inflammation, burning, fever
- Barid (Cold) Mizaj — causes sluggishness, poor circulation
- Yabis (Dry) Mizaj — results in atrophy, dryness, weakness
- Ratab (Moist) Mizaj — leads to edema, phlegmatic disorders

2.3 Etiological Factors (Asbab-e-Maraz)

- Asbab-e-Sittah Zarooriyah: Six essential lifestyle and environmental factors
- Asbab-e-Maddiyah: Material causes like accumulation of morbid matter
- Asbab-e-Failiyah: Functional derangements (e.g., Quwa dysfunction)
- Asbab-e-Tamaddiyah: External contagions (e.g., infections)
- Asbab-e-Samtiyah: Positional/postural causes
- Asbab-e-Nafsaniyah: Psychological causes

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3. Disease Causation in Modern Pathophysiology

Modern medicine views disease as a result of alterations at the molecular or cellular level, including:

- Genetic mutations causing defective proteins
- Inflammatory mediators and cytokine storms
- Cellular stress and apoptosis
- Immune dysregulation (autoimmunity or

- immunodeficiency)
- Microbial pathogenesis (bacteria, viruses, fungi)
- Metabolic disorders (e.g., insulin resistance in diabetes)

4. Comparative Analysis: Su-e-Mizaj vs Modern Pathophysiology

Table 1: Comparative view of disease causation in Unani and Modern Medicine

Aspect	Unani Medicine (Su-e-Mizaj)	Modern Pathophysiology
Cause	Qualitative imbalance in temperament	Molecular/cellular dysfunction
Focus	Whole-body balance, humoral changes	Cellular and systemic mechanisms
Diagnosis	Pulse, tongue, physical exam, temperament	Lab tests, imaging, biomarkers
Disease Progression	From Su-e-Mizaj to structural damage	From subclinical changes to clinical disease
Treatment Approach	Restore Mizaj, evacuate morbid matter, lifestyle correction	Targeted drug therapy, surgery, molecular repair

5. Illustrative Diagrams

Figure 1 and Figure 2 below illustrate the contrasting disease causation pathways in Unani medicine and modern pathophysiology.

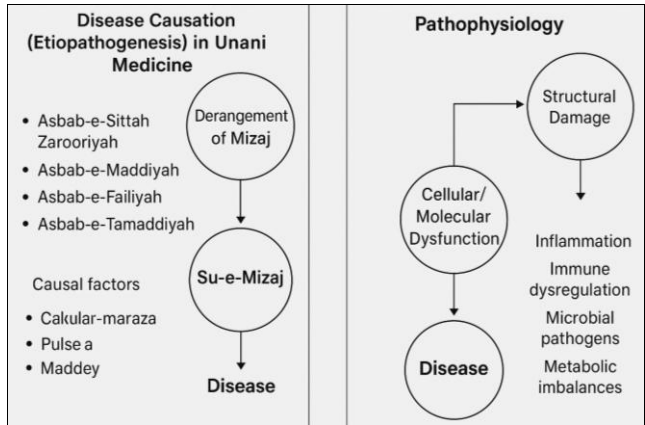


Fig 1: Comparative flow diagrams of Su-e-Mizaj in Unani and Cellular/Molecular Dysfunction in Modern Pathophysiology.

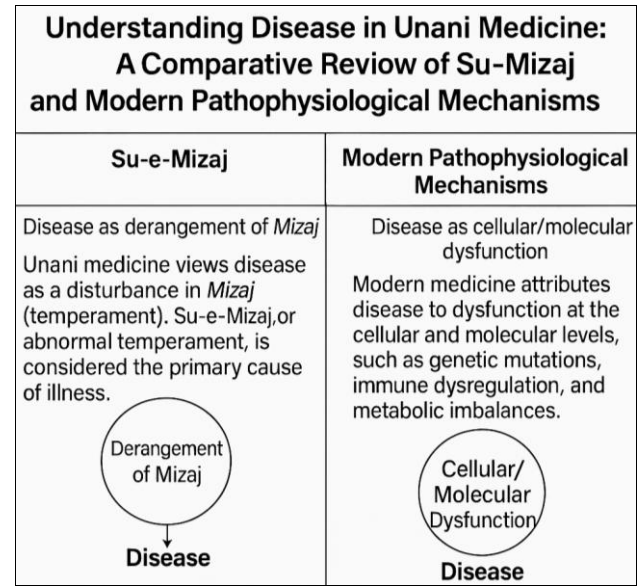


Fig 2: Final comparison chart with corrected border and layout for Unani and Modern concepts of disease causation.

6. Conceptual Convergence and Integrative Outlook

Despite their differing paradigms, both Unani and modern systems recognize the importance of maintaining internal

balance to prevent disease. Unani's emphasis on Mizaj and humoral regulation mirrors modern ideas of homeostasis, while its focus on lifestyle determinants (*Asbab-e-Sitta Zarooriyah*) aligns with the preventive principles in contemporary medicine. An integrative model could harness Unani diagnostics with modern interventions, fostering personalized, predictive, and preventive care. This convergence allows for a more holistic understanding of disease and opens the door for cross-disciplinary collaboration.

7. Conclusion

Unani medicine offers a deeply individualized and qualitative understanding of disease through Su-e-Mizaj. Modern pathophysiology, while grounded in molecular detail, often lacks personalization. This paper highlights that a synergistic perspective, combining the constitutional approach of Unani with mechanistic modern insights, can improve both diagnostic accuracy and therapeutic efficacy. Future healthcare models should consider integrating traditional wisdom with evidence-based biomedicine for more comprehensive.

Conflict of Interest

Not available

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