Avicenna’s Contribution in Creating Medical Educational Poems

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Abstract

Avicenna’s capability in providing medical educational poems as a distinguished technology in medicine is one of the dimensions of his complicated character that has been ignored despite the fact that he was skillful and the initiator of this field. Various translations of his great and complete medical poem to French, English and also numerous handwritten manuscripts in the libraries across world prove the importance of this subject. The aim of this paper is to provide a brief history of educational verse and its entrance into medicine and to cast light upon Avicenna’s contribution in creating such poems from descriptive-analytic viewpoint. This study not only paves the way for international interaction but also presents Avicenna’s brilliancy and creativity, as an influential Persian speaker, in this field.

Keywords: Avicenna, educational verse, medicine, poem.
Introduction

Avicenna (c. 980—1037) is a sophisticated and well-known scientist in medical sciences, physics, mathematics, logic and vocabulary, poetry and mysticism and theology in such a way that historians consider him as the greatest among scientists, scholars and philosophers and an influential figure in Iranian-Islamic culture and civilization (Najmabadi, 1996; 477-497; 536-554). Diversity in Avicenna’s works and thoughts which is manifested in his writings demonstrates his eagerness to gain knowledge and reach the ideal perfection. These characteristics along with being faithful to God led to his success in philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, music and mysticism, language (vocabulary) and literature. Avicenna has presented great works in all of these fields.

One of the great aspects of Avicenna’s character which needs more research is his great talent and interest in creating medical educational poems. These great and distinguished poems have been ignored because he has had many other successful works in various scientific disciplines. Avicenna's writings in both Persian and Arabic have prepare the way for the development of these languages. He has written over 200 works in many of sciences in his era (ibid, 10). One of his works in the realm of medical poems is called Arjouzeh¹ the most famous of which is “Sinai” which includes 1326 verses in Arabic Rajaz meter. The noticeable features of Avicenna’s educational poems are simplicity, fluency and people's positives replies. Avicenna presented medicine in theoretical and practical parts. Researchers have paid much attention to his work by translating it to French and English, while in Islamic countries it has been ignored. Some of his works include his own thoughts which emphasize the necessity of research in his great works.

Background

It is noticeable that the current study has been compiled by casting a glance on Ph.D. thesis of the author which is a collection of other different books which are not in accordance with harmonious findings of this study. Thus, the present paper attempts to rejuvenate one of the overlooked aspects of Avicenna i.e. the creation of the mentioned educational medical texts which can be considered as a remarkable educational technology. Furthermore, the Iranian-Islamic heritage can be taken into account by studying these ignored texts. Therefore, the following questions will be treated momentarily:

   1. Who is the pioneer in medical-educational poetry?
   2. How could poetic medical works affect audiences’ learning in Abbasid period?
   3. What were the features of Avicenna’s educational medical poetry as a supreme technology?

Meaning of Poetry

Poetry means order and coherence. In Lesan-Al-Arab it is described as, “I strung the pearl” (Ibn Manzour, n.d.; 578), or, “if you join two things to each other, you have ordered them” (Ibid,

¹ A poem written in Rajaz meter including scientific content
578). Literary speaking, word has been divided to two types: discrete and verse (poetical), the word poetry is used for utterances and the poetical one is used for words (Al-Zamakhshari, 1881; 299). For the eloquent, poetry is a kind of prose that some of its words are come together in a way that they are ordered to be read poetically (ibid, 300). Accordingly, it can be concluded that poetry is a kind of text which is similar to a poem in its meter and rhyme but contently speaking, imagination and emotion is less important than poetry and the attempt of the poet is to maintain the meter and the rhyme without putting soul into the words. Separating versification from composing poems, when poet mingles these two things, can be related to literary taste. Those works which have been poeticized by scholars, grammarians, astronomers and historian in centuries are samples of such educational poetic works. A good example could be Ibn Malek's poem (Alphieh) about the knowledge of Arabic Syntax (Sharifi, 2011; 19).

The Appearance of Educational Poetry

Educational poetry as a part of history of literature appeared as a result of relation between poetry and science at the end of the Umayyad and in Abbasid period (Yaqub, 1990; 87). The necessity to maintain the sciences was the reason of this appearance because the most effective method of teaching was poetry due to the fact that the poetical texts are more easy to learn and they will be attractive forever. After scientists' efforts in eight and nine centuries, tenth century as the time of experience in intellectual knowledge was an introduction for the appearance of great scientists of Islamic civilization in following centuries. Therefore, by examining the historical process of the emergence of these kind of poems, it can be concluded that the first educational poems in Islamic countries have been produced by Abdulhamid Lahaqi in Abbasid period. Taha Hussein says, “Certainly Aban ibn Abdul Hamid Lahaqi is the creator of this kind of art i.e. educational poetry in Arabic literature.” He goes on to state that, “It seems that Aban is the first person who has considered this art.” (Hussain, 1969; 286). In this regard, Shoqi Zeyf says, “This is a kind of art that Abbasid poets created it which has no roots in the past ... in order to develop the intellectual life of the period in which a poet has versified some teachings or behavior of life or news (Zeyf, 2004; 190).

According to some researchers, Persian and Greek cultures are of the most influential countries for proliferation and the interaction of these poems. But Malekoshoara Bahar believes although this art has appeared in this language by influence of foreign culture following the translation of mythical, historical, scientific and technical books that were translated into Arabic by Iranians, but surely Iranian culture has been more influential in this matter because “the Arabs did not narrate anything from Greece and other nations except for the scientific and technical books; they narrated mythical, historical, story and cultural books from Iranian culture, but they were not interested in Greece and other nations’ history and literature, and we believe the reason was the high similarity between Arab’s religious ideas with the moral, social and religious principles of Iranian people; the base of the Zoroastrian monotheism was different from idolatry in Greece and India and Trinity of Christians but it was similar to Islamic monotheism (Bahar, 1976; Vol 1; 155). We should not say the emergence of educational poems in the Arabic language (which mostly translated into Arabic at the time of the Abbasids) is the only result of other nations influence on them but rather the transformation of scientific and literary life of Muslims (from the first days of Islam to early Abbasids) and the urgency of the society of that
era to keep the sciences could be the main reason for this. Also, we should not forget the effect of tranquility after the conquests of Muslims (Ali Mohammad, 1996). However, most of the experts believe that educational poem was born from Abbasid literature but it should be noted that Umayyad era along with providing lexical Arjouzeh, presented educational literature as well. For example, divan of Amir Khalid bin Yazid bin Mu'awiya known as Hakim Al Marwan (d. 708 AD) in the field of rational sciences (physics and mathematics) entitled Paradise of Wisdom includes over 2600 verses about chemistry (Masoudi, 1948; Vol 4; 258). But it can be argued that in Abbasid era, most writers, scholars and poets inclined toward educational poem and eventually it led to the perfection of a significant literary phenomenon like the educational poems (Ali Mohammad, 1996; 238).

**Objectives of Educational Poems from Scholars’ Viewpoint**

Hana Alfakhury believes the purpose of educational poem is to educate and reform thoughts, beliefs and the conscience of the humanity (n.d., 39). Abdul Aziz Atiq argues that the purpose of educational poem is to educate people in moral, religious, philosophical or other public educational fields (Atiq, 1976; 329). Razmju believes the purpose of composing educational poem is to teach ethics and acceptable religious and mystical ideas or other sciences and technologies (Razmju, 1993; 78).

**Application of Educational Poem in Medicine**

The growing trend of science and literature during Abbasid period and the interest of students in learning any knowledge on one hand and the interest of artist scholars in transformation of scientific prose texts into poetry with maintaining the meaning in a pleasant form on the other hand not only showed their ability but also motivated the audiences to learn scientific subjects. Hence, the doctors tried to find a solution for facilitating the education of medicine in order to improve the health of all strata of the society and teaching them the necessities of basic training for health due to the fact that medicine was among required knowledge of general public and was not dedicated to a particular class of people and moreover, Islam believes that learning medicine is essential for Muslims. Although at the time of advent of Islam in the land of Hijaz people were aware about knowledge. They were mostly interested in other areas and could not revolve around this great historical event in their homeland. Gradually, in the Abbasid era, the golden era and scientific movement took place and Muslims reached great developments in scientific and mystical fields including development in medical knowledge (Mojabi, 2006; 238).

Accordingly with the help of turning scientific works into poetry and facilitating the process of teaching medicine, poem was propounded as a technology and was applied at that time. This led the doctors to versify by themselves or other people who were erudite in composing poems. The audiences were able to memorize these poems more easily because these poems had simple and pure meter and nebulous concepts were not complicated to learn and because everyone could learn necessities of health in one reading, this led to the appearance of many poetic medicine works (ibid; 238).
Features of Educational Poem and its Effect on Learning Medicine

One of the characteristics of poetic language i.e. musical language is its fast learning, high durability and universality. Medicine has been a people-oriented science since ancient times and belonged to all classes of people. It was difficult knowledge and was required by the society and the poem could facilitate it for people based on their needs. In this respect, the scholars of that time considered the language of the poem as the best way to teach science. These poems’ simplicity, purity and the fluency of verses helped everyone, even with little knowledge, to simply acquire the medicinal prescription. Low medical facilities and in contrast, ease of access to the necessary medical information through these poems and the instruction which was offered at the end of every poem for curing any ailment, gave people the opportunity to go to groceries throughout the town or city and help themselves in healing their pain. In that era, these poems could play the role of the books which are being published today with the titles of “Family Physicians” etc. As such, Islamic scholars turned different sciences into poetry to spread these sciences and facilitate the learning the most famous of which is Alfiyeh by Ibn Malik in syntax and medical idyll of Avicenna (Meysari, 1994; 30). However, “a significant number of books that have been written in this style have been destroyed over time” (Algood, 1978; 129).

Avicenna’s Contribution in Creating Medical Poetic Works and Their Influence on Medicine

Avicenna was a polymath but his composing in medicine has not gained an appropriate critical attention. Being aware of the poetic works of Abu Rayhan Biruni’s Seydneh and Muhammad Ibn Ayyub Al-Tabari’s Shomarnameh, Avicenna became aware of the importance of creating poetical work and decided to produce such works. Therefore, besides numerous precious works in various fields of science such as medicine, philosophy and logic, he has other literary works such as theory of poetry, and odes and Arjouzeh which demonstrate that he was an artist in poetry. Brown, English orientalist, considers him a lyrical poet among Persian poets; a poet who wrote ghazal and khamr also quatrains similar to Khayyam’s Rubaiyat. “Brown published Avicenna’s fifteen poems including twelve quatrains and couplets and two odes in lyrical and wine poetry which do not exceed 40 verses. He translated them into German and published them in Gotting Nachricerten” (Badi’e Sharif, 1952; 304).

Avicenna has short poems in various topics such as deduction, induction, contradictory, allegory, kham words and ashr topics. By composing different Arabic and Persian odes in different literary collections, as well as other poems on various topics such as jealousy, wisdom, oldness, asceticism, wine, description, love, generosity, death, pride and the relationship of soul with the body, he could be a successful and famous poet (ibid, 304). But he dedicated himself to science, philosophy and medicine, therefore he did not have sufficient time to focus on poetry. “If Avicenna wanted to be a poet with that great talent, he could be at the top with no doubt (Parsinejad, 1954; 56).

With the help of his inner talent, Avicenna used one of the most common meters in Arabic poetry i.e. Rajaz meter which is based Mustaf’ilun Mustaf’ilun Mustaf’ilun and it has other forms of Mustafelatun, Muftaelun, Fa’altun, Mafoulun, Mustafal, Faoulun, Fa’alna,
Mustafelatun and Faelun and it is called in Arabic literature as “Hemar Al-Shoara” which had been used as a new and influential technology in teaching difficult medicinal subjects in that era. Most of Avicenna’s medical educational poems are about medicine, anatomy, the experienced knowledge, medical tips, healthcare, confirming health through urine or pulse and etc. It is impossible to get access to such poems related to medicine before Avicenna. With regard to the extent of Avicenna’s works in medical poetic knowledge, it is clear that his poetic works has been ignored. This information can be regarded as invaluable sources in discovering the ignored aspects of Avicenna’s life (Alibaba, 1948; 8). Along with his well-known medical poems, Avicenna’s most famous Arjouzeh can be as follows:

1. Arjouzeh about anatomy which has 168 couplets of which there are several copies in libraries such as Goethe, Vatican and Britain Museum. In Vatican there is another manuscript of 89 couplets under the same title (Arjan, 1937; 15: Brocklman, 1971; 842: Qanavaty, 1950; 171). The opening of the poem is, “Thank God, the creator and eternal Creator of the causes.” (Najmabadi, 1996, 544). The second poem begins with, “Thank God for my improvement and protecting me against people who are speaking ill of me.” (Ghanavati, 1950, 171).

2. Arjouzeh about experiences which has 252 couplets and begins with, “I have begun a good poem with the name of God in which I can find all my experiences during the time.” There are manuscripts of this poem in Paris libraries and British Museum and some other places (Najmabadi, 1996; 554).

3. Arjouzeh about medicine (healthcare) which has 151 couplets and begins with, “Listen to all my orders and obey because medicine is accompanying with my definite words.” (Qanvati, 1950; 177). There are two manuscripts of this poem in Aya Sophia and Berlin libraries (Arjan, 1937, 18; Brocklman, 1971; 91: Qanavaty, 1950; 177). There are several copies in the libraries around the world and it is written by Moslem Ibn Sina (Najmabadi, 1996; 552).

4. Arjouzeh about medicine (4 chapters) has two copies in Berlin and includes 140 couplets which begins with, “Avicenna who has hope in God’s forgiveness and he always seeks help from Him says, four seasons in a year that has been set up for years…” (Qanavati, 1950; 177).

5. Arjouzeh about medical recommendations that has 73 couplets and like the previous one, has some advice related to medicine. There are several copies of this poem around the world such as Berlin and Istanbul libraries, and some other places (ibid, 1). This Arjouzeh begins with, “The first day the sun enters the Aries, drink some half-warm water immediately” (Charles Koones, 1952; 141).

6. Arjouzeh about Hippocrates' testaments that has 148 or 93 couplets. As the name of the book shows, it is about Hippocrates' words (wills) in medical tradition. There are copies of this poem in British Museum and Berlin library. This Arjouzeh begins with, “It is likely that a secret has been always hidden inside the books and among people.” (Qanavati, 1950; 18).

7. About indicating body health through pulse and urine that has 111 couplets and begins with, “Pulse is a truthful guide that tells the truth about the disease which skilled doctors know it and urinate is in the second place that its status is obvious.” And ends with, “And
it’s the time for me to put an end to what I have versified by praising God”. Retrieved from http://www.nlm.nih.gov

8. Arjouzeh about marriage which is about a compound medicine that helps the recovery of the body. This poem has 100 couplets and begins with, “You that ask me about Hajar Alzakhira , you should know that it has many benefits.” (Charles Koones, 1952;142).

9. Arjouzeh about health care that has 67 couplets and begins with, “Praise God who is the One, wise, health giving and gentle.” (ibid,142).

10. Benefits of ginger that has 23 couplets and begins with, “You that has kept the secret of ginger and has been allocated to good quality, so every person complains about cool temperament.” (Qanavati, 1950; 192). And ends with, “And praise and thousands of greetings that its scent in everywhere and the thousands of greetings”. (ibid, 192).

11. Arjouzeh about marriage that begins with, “You that complain about backache, waist and knee pain.” And ends with, “His family and his good companions every day and night continuously.” (ibid, 192).

12. Two benefits regarding health care is two-part Arjouzeh. The first part includes 8 and the second part contains 13 couplets and begins with, “Do not eat anything before the previous meal is completely digested”. The second part begins with, “Listen to all I say, put them in practice, for medicine is to be introduced with my sayings” (ibid, 193).

But his well-known medical Alfieh is Arjouzeh Alsinai which is very important in its kind and it is more famous and longer than other Avicenna’s poems and it is a summary of his famous book Qanoun which is in Arabic. This collection includes 1326 couplets. It is a comprehensive course of medicine and related techniques which contains the principles of ancient medicine, description of key symptoms in diagnosis of different diseases and their cure. This collection is known by some other names such as Medical Alfieh, Arjouzeh Alsinai, Arjouzeh Alkobra and Well-Known Medical Arjouzeh. There are several copies of this collection in some libraries around the world (Al Qeis, 2007; 666).

For the first time, some parts of this Arjouzeh were quoted in Oyoun Al Anba fi Tabaghat AlAtebba written by Ibn Abi Osaybi (d. 1270) and is the most important source for history of medicine till 13th century. Indeed, its complete text has been preserved and its French translation has been published in 1965. Few years later, its English translation was published in America with the title of Arjuza Al-Tabia. Arjouzeh Alsinai consists of an introduction and theoretical and practical parts. In its brief introduction, the author has focused on explaining the benefits of scientific facts in poetic composition. He considers simplicity in content, easy meter and memorization, brevity and freshness as the main features of composing poetry and begins his poem by praising God, “Praise God who is powerful, dignified, the only commander and Lord of the heavens. (Albaba, 1984; 9). And goes on to say that, “Glorified is God who is the One and has granted life to us. And peace be upon the prophet Muhammad to whom he granted his epistle and released people from aberration” (Abd alrahim, 1998, 57-58).

The theoretical part (body works, changes of body and effective factors on diseases) has been divided into three chapters of physiology, etiology, semiology. This part also describes physics, Setta Al Zaruriyah, pathology, etiology and semiotics. In fact this seven-part of physics begins with the principles to the actions:
“But the foundations of physics that body is based on its temperaments. “And Hippocrates’s saying that counts physic foundations: water, soil, fire, wind and it is true.” (Avicenna, 714; 1) “And aging of the body depends on how people eat.” (ibid, 25)

In this part the reader becomes aware of the effect of the sun and stars, eating, drinking, sleeping, movement and immovability and vomiting.

“And then we deal with the knowledge of temperament” (Avicenna, 714; 1)

In practical part the author has tried to introduce some factors which are essential for preserving health such as choosing the appropriate place to live, the way of eating, drinking, sleeping, body activities, seasons, travels, children health, selecting nanny, convalescence, elderly care and public health. Another part is how to restore health which has been poeticized in this part:

“Sanitation is the necessity of good health, and I expressed it unequivocally”. (ibid, 26)

“And now after presenting the issues of health care and sanitation, I begin to cure the diseases”. (ibid, 20)

“Here I introduce some herbal medicine that helps the expectoration.” (ibid, 21)

Brevity is one of the features of this collection of poems in such a way that Avicenna could include five types of medicine i.e. causes, knowledge of the disease, purposes, prevention and cure (Al-Roubi, 1968; 148).

The chapter which is about knowledge of cures has been allotted to these issues: "food therapy" and medication therapy such as mucus discharge medications, energy producer medications (heat, coldness, moisture and dryness) and also explaining medications with simple properties (laxative, obstruent, obstruction resolver) and compound properties (lithoclast, urine). In the end (practical part), in addition to the principles of child management (embryonic period, birth pain, nursing and child's bringing up), the author has explained vascular surgery, tissue surgery, orthopedics, massage, cupping and phlebotomy which is followed by these verses:

“Protecting the child in his/her mother's womb in such a way that his/her body is being kept from injuries in this period” (ibid, 23).

“We drag the dislocated bone until it returns to its proper place. After that, we bandage the place and keep it in the same status. Then we prescribe medicines which help healing and joining the bone. Moreover we recommend that the patient eat sour food until the inflammation heals; We should not afraid of inflammation as well. Bone Fracture will be healed in one month or sometimes in 10 days” (ibid, 44).

“And now that I have finished this well-ordered and lasting collection of medical orders, I introduce the methods of surgery”, “One of these surgeries is belonging to vessels”, “But considering bone fracture; we drag the separated bone until it returns to its place, after it returns in its place, we tie it firmly and leave it for some time”, “Then we prescribe those medications which cause bone eclipse and recommend the patient that he/she eat sour food”, “We wait until the recovery of the osteitis and we do not get worried about the osteitis”, “Recovery of the patient will take 10 days to a month” (ibid, 47-48). Fortunately, two copies of this valuable collection is available in Malek library in Tehran (Qanavati, 1950; 172). Another copy of this
This valuable collection ends in this way:  
“Now that I have finished all my job, I am definitely saying a complete word” (Avicenna, Vol 48; 714).

Although before Avicenna some people had attempted to apply educational poetry in discipline, prosody, jurisprudence, history, vocabulary, derivation and other sciences, however, he has been honored to be the first person who could use Rajaz meter as a new technology for teaching medicine and logic. He has also ended up to other forms of such as “complete” and “long” poems (Koones, 1952; 138).

**Avicenna’s Incentive Creation in Developing the Art of Educational Medical Poetry**

Having composed a valuable collection of educational medical poetry, Avicenna created other works which show the importance of his contribution in poeticizing. Here are some works which were written subsequently:

In 11th century, Ibn Arzoun composed about arjouzeh about fever; in 13th century Ibn Almanasef composed poems about the creation of man and Mahmoud Alshybany composed about phlebotomy. In general medicine, Mafzal Ibn Majed wrote *Quench the Thirst and Disease Treatment* and Muhammad Ibn Abbas wrote about antidote (antidote). In 14th century, Ahmad Ibn Hasan al-Khattab wrote arjouzeh about a summary of current medicine information of the time; Alkhezr Ibn Ali and Lesan Aldin Ibn al-Khatib wrote two arjouzehs about food (different types of food) and antidote. In 15th century, Abd Al-valid Ibn Alsahne wrote a complete collection of medical poems and Muhammad Ibn Qaraomas wrote about plants (marsh nut and anacardium). In 15th century, Mansour Ibn Abd Alrahman wrote Arjouzeh in healthcare and Ibrahim Ibn Alhanbali poeticized a book named *Bar o Sa’at* which was written by Abi Bakr Razi.

In 16th century, David Al Antaki Alzarir and Ali Ibn Alvahed Sejelmasi wrote Alphieh (of 1000 couplets) in medicine. In 17th century, Ahmed Ibn Saleh Aldor’i wrote about cures and medications. Abdolvahhab Ibn Ahmed Adraq wrote 30 couplets about benefits of spearmint. In 18th century, Ali Ibn Tohan Alazhari wrote Arjouzeh in general medicine (Koones, 1952; 142). In addition to these poems (Arjouzeh), there are various interpretations such as interpretation of Ibn Roshd, *Precious Jewelries* written by Mousa Ibn Ibrahim Baghdadi (d. 1471), Ibn Talmous, Alsoqla’s *Interpretation*, Alsaghali’s *Interpretation* (15th century), and Musa Ibn Azroun wrote an interpretation on Arjouzeh and Abu Muhammad Ibn Alghasani (15th century) wrote an interpretation on Azroun's work with the title of *Arroz Al-Maknoun* on Interpretation of Ibn Azroun which added to richness of Arab and Persian literature.

In poetic works which were written after Avicenna, it is noticeable that poets’ main sources were the available medical books. But Avicenna’s works are the result of his innate knowledge that were prose in the beginning and then he himself poeticized them. In spite of the greatness of these poems regarding language and technology, because of the lack of literary beauty and because of modernity in medicine, these poems have been ignored these days.
Mu’jam Alodoba Alatba is a two-volume book in Arabic which introduces almost 231 Arab and Iranian poets who were medical doctors and have composed medical poems. This book has emphasized the important contribution of Avicenna in creation of such works.

Effective Factors in Avicenna’s Success in Educational Medical Poems

Comparing to other medical poems, Avicenna’s poems have exclusive features such as seeking help from God in the beginning and at the end of the poems, resorting to the Prophet and his family (PBUH), making profit from the experiences and recommendations of ancient experts, self-reliance, categorization of subjects, brief and compressed way of explanations in simple and memorable poetic formats, emphasis on practical aspects, multilateral view, avoiding the trifling details are the obvious features of Avicenna’s works. These features have made him a well-known medical doctor in various medical fields such as eye, tubes, skin, pharmacology and pharmacy, orthopedic, psychiatrist and psychologist.

These poems are not clear at times. Some couplets are too nebulous for the reader to understand and it is because of the fact that he had to sacrifice the meaning to create a well-formed poem. Therefore, brevity is one of the features of these poems. Sometimes he has summarized a chapter in a half-verse or he had to change the main subject in order to keep the meter of the poem.

Conclusion

By having a glance at Avicenna’s works, it could be concluded that in spite of his preoccupation in various sciences, he has not ignored the best educational pattern and technology which can encourage the learners. He has provided the most accurate medicine poems to improve the education which was, in his opinion, a necessity for people and religion. He has also shown his concern to support this important and essential knowledge by creating an invaluable collection of poems which led to the creation of other works in this field. By applying Avicenna’s methods and influence in this field, we hope that scientists create or improve new methods of medical learning in order to develop sciences and attract the learners to the necessary sciences.
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