When I talk of the first description of an illness by a 10th century Arabic doctor, I am met with a dilemma. The dilemma consists in the fact that, on the one hand, I am presenting a real, but up to now little known or even unknown observation by a medieval Arabic doctor of the symptoms of an illness, an observation, however, which has had no influence on medicine. On the other hand, I do not want to contribute to the support of one or the other of the views which currently dominate the research of medieval Arabic medicine. I term these two views the Romantic and the Classical approach.

The Romantic approach to medieval Arabic medicine, which dominated European thought until the beginning of this century and which can, in fact, still be observed in the Arabic world, shows euphoric admiration for the achievements and discoveries of medieval Arabic doctors. These "discoveries", however, are usually attributable to ignorance on the part of the medical world of the Ancients, in that these discoveries were either already common knowledge or, if medieval Latin translations were used, that the Arabic text was interpreted incorrectly by the medieval translator. (1)

The second approach, the Classical one, goes to the other extreme. This interpretation sees the medieval Arabic doctors only as loyal administrators of the Ancient body of knowledge, a view which is gaining more and more strength in Europe. Both approaches, the Romantic as well as the Classical, create a distorted picture because they are too restricted. As usual, the truth lies somewhere in the middle.

The medieval Arabic doctors were, indeed, administrators of the Ancient body of knowledge, but they equally developed this knowledge with their own observations and introduced innovations as well. As a result of these extreme approaches, however, the real achievement of the medieval Arabic doctors has been overlooked, and that achievement is the restructuring of the Ancient body of medical knowledge. Not until this restructuring took place, which is, in fact, most fully developed in the Qānūn by Ibn Sīnā, was it possible for medieval European scholars to adopt the material at hand, assimilate and develop it further.