
History of Contemporary Medicine in Iran

The Historical Backgrounds of the Ministry of Health Foundation in Iran

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Abstract

The early efforts for promotion of public health measures and prevention of fatal epidemic diseases in Iran date back to the second half of the 19th century. Based on historical records, the informal protosanitary councils had existed since the early 1850s, but a new formal health institution called “*Sanitary Council*”, or “*Majles-e Hefz al-Sehheh*” was founded in 1881. Then, it was reestablished as a permanent council in 1904. The Sanitary Council was the only major public health authority under the auspices of “*Ministry of the Interior*” up to 1920. Then the Ministry of Health and Charity Affairs or “*Vezerat-e Sehhyeh va Omuor-e Kheiryeh*” was founded in 1920, but it was dissolved in 1921. Between 1921 and 1941, there was no ministry of public health in Iran and during this period, the public health and medical affairs were managed by the Public Health Administration known as *Sehhyeh Koll-e Mamlekati* that was established in 1926 and finally in 1941, the Ministry of Health (*Vezerat-e Behdari*) was founded.

Presented here, is the historical backgrounds of the foundation of the Ministry of Health in Iran, as well as the list of the Health Ministers between 1941 and 1979.

Introduction

A series of far-reaching reforms started in mid-nineteenth century in Iran.¹ These reforms were mainly the result of endeavors of Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Kabir, the first Prime Minister of Naser al-Din Shah, the fourth king of Qajar Dynasty (1794 – 1925). In the filed of public health and medicine, major reformations were:

- *The foundation of Dar al-Fonun*: the most important Amir Kabir’s achievement was the establishment of the first modern higher

educational institute, the Dar al-Fonun (House of Techniques), in 1851.² Dar al-Fonun had a medical department. Its foundation was an effective step in the propagation of the modern medicine in Iran.^{3,4}

- The construction of the first modern hospital in 1852 was a turning point that resulted in the foundation of more hospitals in the future. Its name was “*State Hospital*” or “*Marizkhaneh-ye Dowlati*”.⁵
- The introduction of vaccination program against smallpox was started in 1809 and reinforced in Amir Kabir’s era.^{5,6}
- Licensing of physicians: in 1851, the license requirement for physicians introduced by Amir Kabir. Later in 1911, a law passed in the Parliament obligating physicians and dentists to pass an examination at the medical school.⁶
- Establishment of a new formal “*Sanitary Council*” (*Majles-e Hefz al-Sehheh*) in 1881 and its reestablishment in 1904 resulted in public health promotion in Iran. It served as the forerunner of the Ministry of Health.⁵

The foundation of the Ministry of Health

The following events will be discussed as the forerunner of the Ministry of Health’s foundation in chronological order:

Establishment of the Sanitary Council (Majles-e Hefz al-Sehheh)

As Dr. Ebrahimnejad quoted in his research, “ad hoc sanitary councils had existed since the early 1850s.”⁵ Based on the study by Dr. Floor, at that time, Iranians suffered from a broad range of diseases.⁶ Dr. Cyril Elgood (1892 – 1970) mentioned the history of establishment of the Sanitary Council in Iran. He was a physician at the British Embassy in Tehran, from 1926 to 1936.⁷ Dr. Floor also pointed out that “after the Great

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Famine of 1871 – 1873, that had been accompanied by cholera epidemic and plague, the Sanitary Council was founded.”⁶ According to Dr W. Floor, the International Sanitary Commission Meetings of Istanbul (1866) and Vienna (1874) obligated Iran to create a Board of Health in Tehran. He cited that Naser al-Din Shah Qajar instructed Dr. Joseph Desire Tholozan (1820 – 1897), the French physician, to found a new institution, responsible for public health in the country. It was initially known as "*Majles-e Sehheh*" (*Board of Health*) and later as "*Majles-e Hefz al-Sehheh*" (the Council for Preservation of Health).⁶

The members of the Sanitary Council consisted of both Iranian and European physicians, as well as a few official authorities. The physicians received their salary from the government.⁵ The majority of these physicians were medical teachers of Dar al-Fonun (Figure 1).⁵ The members of the Sanitary Council had meetings once weekly at the office of the Head of Dar al-Fonun. The main responsibility of the Sanitary Council was to encourage authorities to promote the public hygiene.⁶

A. The first meeting of the Sanitary Council

The first meeting of the Sanitary Council was held in Tehran in 1881. The members were as follows:^{5, 8, 9}

- The Minister of Education (*Vazir-e Maaref*) and the Head of Dar al-Fonun.



Figure 1. Members of the Sanitary Council (*Majles-e Hefz al-Sehheh*), unknown date, probably before 1895. From left to right: Dr. Mirza Ali Rais al-Atebba, Dr. Dickson, Mirza Abdullah Tabib, Dr. Joseph Desire Tholozan, Dr. Ali Akbar Khan-e Nafisi, Dr. Cherebinin, and Mirza Kazem-e Shimi.⁵

- Dr. Joseph Desire Tholozan (Figure 2) who was the Naser al-Din Shah’s special physician and the medical teacher of the Dar al-Fonun. He was the first President of the Sanitary Council. Dr. Tholozan made investigations on the occurrence of plague in Iran.¹⁰ His contribution to our knowledge on a disease known as Persian relapsing fever (*Borrelia persica*) should be mentioned. He discovered that the real vector of *Borrelia persica* is a tick, named after him in 1879, *Ornithodoros tholozani*.¹⁰ He also wrote eight books including one on blood circulation.¹¹ Dr. Tholozan spent most of his life in Iran and eventually passed away in 1897 and buried in Tehran.¹²
- Dr. Joseph Dickson (1848 – 1887), the physician of the British Embassy in Tehran.
- Dr. Cherebinin, the physician of the Russian Embassy in Tehran.⁵
- Dr. Ali Akbar Khan-e Nafisi (1831 – 1910) titled as *Nazem al-Atebba*, was graduated from Dar al-Fonun and was the director of the State Hospital for five years. Dr. Nafisi wrote some books on medicine including a book entitled "*Pezeshki Nameh*," as well as a five-volume Persian dictionary known as "*Farhang-e Nafisi*".¹¹
- Mirza Abdullah Tabib, the lecturer at Dar al-Fonun.
- Mirza Kazem-e Shimi, teacher of chemistry at

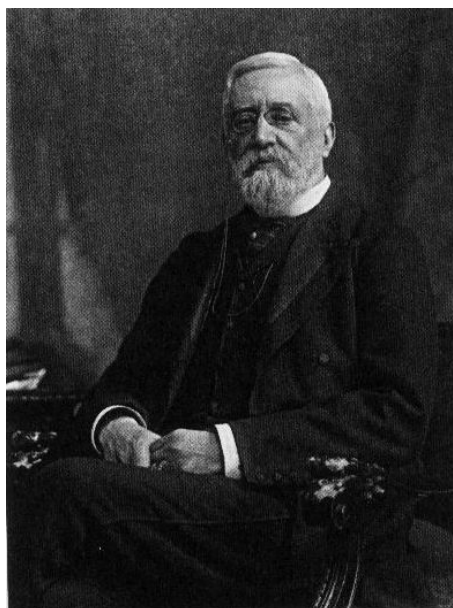


Figure 2. Dr. Joseph Desire Tholozan, the first President of the Sanitary Council.⁹

Dar al-Fonun.

- Dr. Mirza Ali Rais al-Atebba (d.1893) was graduated from the Medical School of Paris, came back to Iran in 1877, and was appointed as the Medical Instructor at Dar al-Fonun School. He translated some medical books on anatomy, pathology, psychiatry, and gynecology into Persian with the cooperation of his colleague, Dr. Khalil Saghafi (1862 – 1944) entitled *Aalam ad-Dowleh*. Dr. Mirza Ali Rais al-Atebba also published a book on pathology entitled “*Javaher al-Hekmeh*.”^{6, 12, 13}

According to Dr. Floor, on the first meeting of the Sanitary Council, the following decisions were made⁶:

- Establishment of two quarantine stations in Qasr-e Shirin (a city near the Iran-Iraq border) and Bushehr Port.
- Dispatching the experienced physicians to all provinces of Iran; these physicians were known as “*Hafez al-Sehheh*” (the Public Health Officer). These Public Health Officers were expected to promote the public sanitary standards, to treat sick people, and to send reports on the status of public hygiene and preventive measures to the Sanitary Council in Tehran.
- Banning the pilgrimage to the holy cities of Iraq for the outbreak of plague in Iraq.

B. Departments of the Sanitary Council

In 1880s, most major cities of Iran had a department of the Sanitary Council.⁵ Special inspectors were appointed in different parts of Iran including Mazandaran, Yazd, Kerman, Kermanshah, Kurdistan, Semnan, Bushehr, Shiraz, Rasht, Tabriz, Sabsevar, and Saveh. They were in contact with the Sanitary Council in Tehran.⁵

C. Other duties of the Central Sanitary Council

The Sanitary Council had other duties such as:

- Supervision of the health measures at the schools by the aid of special Health Inspectors (*Mofattesh-e Sehhyeh-ye Madares*).⁶
- The Sanitary Council was in touch with health officials in Iraq and Ottomans’ medical representatives.⁶

The English physician and Orientalist, Dr. Edward Granville Browne (1862 – 1926), attended one of the meetings of the Sanitary Council in Tehran at the end of 1887. Based on his notes, he was favorably impressed with the quality of

discussions of the physicians who attended the meeting.⁶

D. The Presidents of the Sanitary Council

- Dr. Joseph Desire Tholozan was the first President of the Sanitary Council. Then, in subsequent years, the following physicians were appointed as the Presidents of the Sanitary Council. They were:
- Dr. Zin al-Abedin Khan Loghman Adham (1855 – 1919) was a graduate of Dar al-Fonun who continued his medical education in Paris. He was appointed as the Head of Council in 1909.⁹
- Dr. Justin Schneider, the French physician of Mozaffar al-Din Shah (r. 1896 – 1906) and lecturer of medicine at Dar al-Fonun from 1891 to 1907.^{6, 9}
- Dr. Coppin, the French physician who came to Iran during the reign of Mozaffar al-Din Shah. He was in Iran between 1907 and 1910.^{6, 9}
- Dr. Georges, the French physician (an internist) who was employed by the Minister of Science, Mirza Mahmoud Khan Ala al-Molk in 1906 as a teacher of Dar al-Fonun. He was in Iran from 1910 to 1911.^{6, 9}

E. The reestablishment of the Sanitary Council

The Sanitary Council was reestablished as a permanent and regularly meeting council in 1904, after the International Sanitation Commission held in Paris in 1900. The Sanitary Council’s members established its regulations. They met monthly or more during times of epidemics.^{6, 14} As Dr. Floor pointed out, the new Sanitary Council had the following main responsibilities⁶:

- Decreasing the spread of infectious diseases, especially cholera and plague.
- Collecting data and organizing public health preventive measures arranged for vaccination.
- Supervising the import and distribution of narcotic drugs.

In addition, the Sanitary Council had also other activities. For instance, in 1919, the President of the Sanitary Council reopened two old hospitals in Mashhad and a public health service was organized for the Khorasan Province.⁶

The foundation of the Ministry of Health and Charity Affairs (Vezerat-e Sehhyeh va Omuor-e Kheiryeh)

The Sanitary Council gradually had appointed

48 health officers in number of towns and continued its activities up to 1920.⁶ Thus, it became the main public health authority, under the auspices of the “*Ministry of the Interior*”. Eventually, during the reign of Ahmad Shah Qajar, the Sanitary Council was transformed into a Ministry known as “*Vezerat-e Sehhyeh va Omuor-e Kheiryeh*” (Ministry of Health and Charity Affairs) and Dr. Ali Asghar Nafisi (1872 – 1949) was appointed as the first Minister of Health in 1920. He was a graduate of Dar al-Fonun who continued his medical studies in Europe. The second Health Minister, a medical graduate of France, Dr. Hassan Adham (1884 – 1957), known as *Hakim od-Dowleh* was appointed in 1921. Subsequently, the Ministry of Health and Charity Affairs (*Vezerat-e Sehhyeh*) was dissolved after three months.^{15, 16}

Creation of the Public Health Administration (Sehhyeh-e Koll-e Mamlekati)

Between 1925 and 1941, there was no Ministry of Health in Iran. The public health and medical affairs were managed by the *Sehhyeh-e Koll-e Mamlekati* (the Public Health Administration), supervised by the *Minister of the Interior*. It was established according to the law passed in the Parliament in 1926. Later on, in 1934, the name of the *Sehhyeh-e Koll-e Mamlekati* changed to “*Edareh-e Koll-e Behdari*”. The Head of the Public Health Administration from 1931 to 1933 was Dr. Kerandel (a French physician who worked at the *Pasteur Institute* founded in 1921). After 1933, the Heads of the Public Health Administration were Dr. Ali Falati (a Switzerland-graduated pathologist), Dr. Abolghasem Bahrami (a graduate of Tehran Medical School in 1921), and Dr. Mohammad Moaazed from Mashhad.^{3, 17}

Ministry of Health and the Health Ministers (1941 – 1979)

During the reign of *Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi* (1941 – 1979), an independent

organization called “*Vezerat-e Behdari*” (the Ministry of Health) was established. In fact, the Public Health Administration or “*Edareh-e Koll-e Behdari*” was transformed into Ministry of Health based on a law passed in the Parliament in 1941.

Table 1 summarizes the main turning points from 1850s to 1979 resulted in establishment of the Ministry of Health.^{4, 16, 18} The first Minister of Health was Ismail Merat (1895 – 1949) who was appointed in 1941. Based on a survey by the author, between 1941 and 1979 totally 30 individuals were appointed as the Ministers of Health in Iran. Of these 30, 21 (70%) were medical and 9 (30%) were nonmedical graduates. Among the medical graduates, to the best of my knowledge, at least 10 (48%) were medical specialists. Their specialities were general surgery, plastic surgery, infectious diseases, dermatology, orthopedics, ophthalmology, and gynecology. Most of the physicians who were appointed as the Ministers of Health were French trained (12 physicians; 57%). Eleven (52%) physicians were the Faculty of Medical School. Five physicians (24%) were the authors of some medical books. The youngest person who was appointed as the Minister of Health aged 35 and the oldest aged 71 years; the mean age was around 52 years. The majority of Health Ministers, i.e., 20 (67.5%) were selected as the Minister of Health once, six were appointed twice, two were appointed four times, one was elected five times, and another one was appointed six times. Table 2 shows the list of Iranian Health Ministers from 1941 to 1979.^{6, 19, 20, 21}

Ministry of Health and Welfare (Vezerat-e Behdari va Behzisti)

In 1975, the two Ministries of Public Health (*Vezerat-e Behdari*) and Social Welfare (*Vezerat-e Refah-e Ejtemae*) were integrated. The name changed to “*Vezerat-e Behdari va Behzisti*” (Ministry of Health and Welfare).¹⁶

Ministry of Health and Medical Education

Table 1. A summary of the historical backgrounds of the foundation of the Ministry of Health in Iran.

Event	Date
The informal Sanitary Councils	1850s
The first formal Sanitary Council (Majles-e Hefz al-Sehheh)	1881
Reestablishment of the Sanitary Council	1904
The foundation of the Ministry of Health and Charity Affairs (<i>Vezerat-e Sehhyeh va Omuor-e Kheiryeh</i>)	1920
Dissolution of the Ministry of Health and Charity Affairs	1921
Creation of the Public Health Administration (<i>Sehhyeh-e Koll-e Mamlekati</i>)	1926
Establishment of the Ministry of Health (<i>Vezerat-e Behdari</i>)	1941
Creation of the Ministry of Health and Welfare (<i>Vezerat-e Behdari va Behzisti</i>)	1975
Creation of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education (<i>Vezerat-e Behdasht va Amuzesh-e Pezeshki</i>)	1986

Table 2. The Iranian Health Ministers (1941–1979).

1.	Ismail Merat (1891 – 1949)
2.	Bagher Kazemi (1892 – 1976)
3.	Ali Asghar Hekmat (1893 – 1980)
4.	Ismail Marzban (1874 – 1960)*
5.	Abdulla Entezam (1896 – 1960)
6.	Amanollah Ardalan (1881 – 1957)
7.	Ghasem Ghani (1893 – 1952)*
8.	Saeed Malek (1888 – 1971)*
9.	Manuchehr Eghbal (1909 – 1977)*
10.	Morteza Yazdi (b.1899)*
11.	Abbas Adham (1880 – 1965)*
12.	Amir Aalam(1877 – 1961)*
13.	Mohammad Ali Varasteh (1896 – 1988)
14.	Jahanshah Saleh (1905 – 1977)*
15.	Abbas Nafisi (1906 – 1976)*
16.	Hassan Adham (1884 – 1957)*
17.	Mohammad Ali Maleki (1903 – 1991)*
18.	Abbasgholi Golshaeian (1902 – 1990)
19.	Sa'bbar Farmanfarmaeean (b.1910)
20.	Abdolhossein Raji (1902 – 1972)*
21.	Mohammad Hossein Adib (1899 – 1984)*
22.	Javad Ashtiani (1897 – 1983)*
23.	Ebrahim Ryahi (1905 – 1989)*
24.	Jamshid Amuzegar (b.1923)
25.	Manuchehr Shahgholi (b.1923 – 2001)*
26.	Anoushiravan Poyan (1929 – 1999)*
27.	Shoja ad-Din Sheikholeslamzadeh (b.1931)*
28.	Nasrolla Moghtader Mojdehi (b.1925)*
29.	Hassan Morshed (1903 – 2000)*
30.	Manuchehr Razmara (b.1931)*

*Physician.

(Vezarat-e Behdasht va Amuzesh-e Pezeshki)

Prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the medical education was the main responsibility of medical schools that were supervised by the Ministry of Higher Education. However, after the Islamic Revolution, the medical education was taken over by the Ministry of Health in 1986 and it was called Ministry of Health and Medical Education (*Vezarat-e Behdasht va Amuzesh-e Pezeshki*).²¹

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