

Avicenna (980 – 1037)

Commonly known as ibn Sina, or in the west by his Latinised name Avicenna, Abu 'Ali al-Husayn ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Sina was the foremost physician and philosopher of his time. He was born around 980 in Afshana, near Bukhara, the hometown of his mother, Setarah. Bukhara was the capital of the Persian Samanid dynasty (now in Uzbekistan) and a centre of Islam. Ibn Sina's father, Abdallah, was a respected Ismaili scholar, and at the time of his son's birth was a governor in one of the emir's estates. Ibn Sina was educated at home by his father and the learned men who gathered there, and soon imbibed all his teachers could offer. He continued his studies, mainly on his own, in astronomy, mathematics, philosophy and medicine, and at sixteen had earned a reputation as an authority on legal and medical matters. He was consulted when the emir became seriously ill in 997; the patient recovered, and for his service ibn Sina was offered a position as court physician, with access to the royal library. During the next few years he also assisted with the financial side of his father's duties, and wrote his first book, a work on philosophy.



Avicennia marina* subsp. *australasica

The New Zealand mangrove subspecies, mānawa, grows in tidal creeks and estuaries from near North Cape to Kawhia and Ohiwa harbours, decreasing from 15 metres high in the north to low shrubs at its southern limits. Pneumatophores, special breathing roots, push up through the mud and are alternately surrounded by

The death of his father when ibn Sina was 22, and the deposition of the Samanid dynasty by Turkish elements in December 1004, changed his life. He left Bukhara and wandered from town to town, fulfilling a series of court appointments as lawyer, physician and administrator by day, and devoting his evenings to philosophical and scientific discussion (which occasionally developed into musical performances and general merriment) with his students. Political intrigue haunted him – several times he was forced into hiding and once he was jailed. He began his *Canon of Medicine* in 1012, and completed it more than a decade later in Hamadan in western Iran. It was a huge medical compendium of Graeco-Roman scientific medicine, with details of 650 plants used in recipes for preparing 758 different medicines. Translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona in the 12th century, it was the standard medical textbook in Europe and the Middle East for the duration of the Middle Ages and is the most famous single book in the history of medicine.

After an attack on Hamadan in 1023, ibn Sina, accompanied by his brother, a favourite pupil and two slaves, fled the city and made a perilous journey to Isfahan. He found refuge at the court of 'Ala al-Dawla and spent his last years as the prince's vizier, accompanying him as physician and general literary and scientific adviser, even on his numerous military campaigns. He continued his medical research and writing, completing major works begun earlier, and treatises on philosophy, medicine and the Arabic language. On a campaign with his patron he suffered an acute abdominal attack that reacted unfavourably to his drastic self-treatment. Although urged to slow down and take life moderately, he resigned himself to his fate, saying, "I prefer a short life with width to a narrow one with length." He died in June 1037, in his 58th year, and was buried in Hamadan, Iran, where he is considered a national icon.

Medical faculties in several countries, a directory of education institutions for health care professionals and a genus of mangrove trees and shrubs are named in his honour.