2151 - Secrets in the medical profession

the question

What is a secret? And what are the rulings governing secrets in a specific profession dealing with secret or confidential issues, such as medicine?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

1. A secret is something which one person discloses to another and asks him not to tell anyone else. This includes situations where it is obvious that the matter should not be disclosed, such as when a man looks around to make sure that there is nobody listening to what he is saying, and so on, as well as private and embarrassing matters that no-one would like everyone to know about.

2. A secret is a trust for which the person who has been asked to keep it is responsible. This is in accordance with both the teachings of Islam and the requirements of chivalry and good manners.

3. In general, secrets should not be disclosed and spreading secrets without a good reason is considered to be subject to the disapproval of sharee’ah.

4. The duty to keep secrets applies even more to people working in professions where disclosure of secrets could reflect badly on the profession itself, as is the case in the medical profession, where people come to practitioners to seek advice and ask for help, and so they have to tell them everything that may help them to do their job properly, including matters which they may not disclose to anyone else, even their closest family members.

5. The obligation to keep secrets does not apply in cases where concealing something may lead to a greater harm that outweighs any harm feared as a result of revealing it. Such situations are of two types:

    1. Cases where a secret has to be revealed on the grounds of choosing the lesser of two evils in order to avoid greater harm, and allowing harm to befall an individual for the sake of the general good. Such cases are of two types:

        1. Where the good of an entire society is at stake

        2. Where the good of an individual is at stake

    1. Cases where it is permissible to reveal a secret because

1. This is in the interests of society as a whole

2. This will protect society from harm

In all these situations, strict attention must be paid to the aims and priorities of sharee’ah, which are to protect Islam, lives, minds, lineages and wealth.