

PROF. AKHTAR AHMED – A MEMOIR OF LOVE, RESPECT, ADMIRATION, AND...

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Prof. Akhtar Ahmed – a majzoob, how can it be. What an unusual analogy! I was kind of surprised when I heard this from one of my revered teachers Prof. Iftekhhar Ahmed who happen to be one of the students of Prof. Akhtar Ahmed like me. However, when he explained this analogy it made complete sense. He explained that a majzoob throws stones on the salik and treats the salik harshly until he is confident that the salik can go through and endure the hardships on the path. Once satisfied, the majzoob opens up for the salik and the knowledge and love starts to flow then. Generally considered a stern and tough teacher, Prof. Akhtar Ahmed was full of knowledge and love for those who know him well.

I am no one to write this memoir, however, I am thankful to Dr. Abdul Malik who invited me to write this. A lot of this memoir is based on old memories and can have recall bias but this is not fantasy, or dreams. All of what follows is true but may not be exact in dates and details. Before I go on describing my love and love relationship with Prof. Akhtar Ahmed, I must admit that except for a month of neurology rotation in 4th year of medical school, I was never his formal trainee, not a house officer, nor a postgraduate trainee, yet I feel like a perpetual student and admirer of him.

Brief Biography

I have not known a lot of this information until recently. I have obtained this from a presentation recently made at the condolence meeting held at Dow University, and a presentation given by Dr. Arsalan Ahmad in 1st Neurology Research Day at Shifa International Hospital. Born in 1935 in Hyderabad Deccan, he graduated with honors from Dow Medical College, Karachi in 1957 ranking first and receiving Mistri Gold Medal. He became member of Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in 1962 and was awarded fellowship of Royal College in 1978. He received fellowship for study of mental retardation in the USA in 1965. He received a WHO fellowship in neurology in 1979. After practicing in Navy Hospital, Karachi in 1962 and 1963, he became incharge of Mental Retardation Project at Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Center from 1964 to 1969. He became assistant professor and founded the depart-

ment of neurology at Dow Medical College in 1970, where he stayed till his retirement in 1997. He became associate professor in 1979, and professor in 1985. He was also the vice principal of Dow Medical College between 1986 and 1988 and visiting professor at Aga Khan University. After his retirement from Dow Medical College, he was also affiliated with Baqai University for couple of years. He was awarded honorary fellowship by College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan and was member of several national and international organizations related to neurology. His research interests included subacute sclerosing encephalitis (SSPE) and mosquito born neurological pathogens. He worked extensively with Japanese researchers on the arthropod borne encephalitides and SSPE in Karachi. He also worked on neurometabolic errors causing mental retardation. He was awarded Lifetime Achievement Award for his services to Neurology by the division of neurology of Shifa International Hospital in September 2007 and Professional Excellence Award in March 2013 by Dow University of Health Sciences.

My First Encounter

As you are entering into the clinical years of medical school training, you fantasize about great clinicians. The reputation of Prof. Akhtar Ahmed as a great clinician was well acknowledged, but came with the scare of stern and tough attitude. He used to collect the whole clinical group in his office and give a lecture on the first day, which he called a khutba. He asked the group to prepare a summary of his khutba to be presented in next grand rounds which used to take place on Tuesday. I don't remember if anyone else from our group did it or not, but I did and I still have a copy of my summary after 21 years, which I presented in the Tuesday grand round and he was very impressed by the content as well as English. He was very picky on the mistakes made by his RMOs and trainees in English. He did not anticipate a well versed summary from a young medical student who was in his first week of rotation with him. This probably paved the wave for future long term relationship. I thank my nieces Nuvera and Muneeza for helping me find this summary, dated June 14, 1993, out of piles of paper that I have at our ancestral home.

Some excerpts from the Khutba

‘Until and unless one reaches a proper diagnosis, one can never effectively treat anybody though one can alleviate the symptoms of the patient.’

‘One should always remember that if one concentrates on his profession and pursues it, money chases him.’

‘One should keep on revising the books, specially the new editions and latest journals. To do this a regular and fixed place of study is a must which can be in an isolated room or a corner of room.’

‘Another remarkable feature of the doctor should be that he must be courageous, bold and sincere enough to admit his pitfalls, shortcomings and inabilities. Not only this, but he should also be broad minded enough to admit a better person as a better person.’

‘Experience, no doubt, is of utmost importance but can prove fatally devastating if it is not collected intelligently.’

‘If one wants to be a very good clinician, one should be regular, hard working, sincere and eager to learn and no doubt, success lies in tireless efforts.’

These above excerpts speak of volumes by themselves. This was the mentality that he preached on first day of encounter.

A case of Rasmussen Encephalitis

This first case assigned to me was a mystery for a novice in neurology. I prepared the case to the best of my abilities and presented to him. I had no clue what the patient had and what I was describing to him, however, he somehow found the descriptions of history correct and detailed enough that he asked me to present the case in morning report used to be held once a week at the Aga Khan University. He took a copy of my history and physical examination sheet. Although I could not make it to the meeting but I was later told that the case was presented and well discussed. It ended up being a case of Rasmussen encephalitis. What an achievement for me!! I had no clue for several years until I got into formal neurology training, that my first case in neurology was a unique neurological syndrome not seen by many neurologists even once in their lifetime.

Betz cells, don't make tukka (guess) and learn how to say 'I don't know'

One of the first questions that I was asked in the ward was what are Betz cells? Of course, I did not know and I started to make guesses. One of his trainees and my mentors Dr. Arsalan Ahmad (now Prof. of Neurology at

Shifa College of Medicine) told me ‘don't guess, don't make tukka, Akhtar sahab does not like tukkas’. If you don't know just say I don't know and go and read. This was a unique lesson. Unfortunately, I have not fully abstained from making guesses after that but the right lesson was taught.

The myth of grade 8 and chamcha

Prof. Akhtar Ahmed used to take the ward test himself, and the myth was that if anyone gets grade 8 from him in the ward test, he is exempted from MRCP Part 1. I was jubilant to get a grade 8.5 from Prof. Akhtar Ahmed, which was like an impossibility and not heard of. My group fellows got 5s and 6s in the grade and thought that I had become chamcha of Prof. Akhtar Ahmed, and that is why he gave me such a high grade. All my hard work went down the drain of chamchagiri. Of course, it turned out that it was just a myth of exemption from MRCP Part 1, although I never attempted that examination.

Grand Rounds and Clinic Visits – Samosa, tea and Fanta

Being impressed by the quality of discussions and cases presented in the grand rounds on Tuesdays and outpatient clinics on Wednesdays, I became a frequent visitor to these two occasions, sometimes even missing my own ward teachings (don't tell anyone please!). I am not sure if this was the attraction of the cases, or the privilege to get the first samosa and tea by Prof. Akhtar Ahmed which kept me going to these places. He used to have the aaloo samosa and tea or Fanta served in the middle of clinic and middle of grand rounds. Having become his chamcha (favorite) helped me being offered this treat first.

Keeping the samosa and chai apart, these grand rounds and clinics were bursting with knowledge not only for a novice like me, but also for the most seasoned and experienced people in the field. The intellectual integrity and honesty was beyond compare. The cases were discussed in length and everyone's opinion was welcome. Prof. Akhtar Ahmed himself will critique the history and examination of the RMO, or postgraduate trainee; will verify the information personally from the patient or family, and will demonstrate the examination findings. If he did not know, he will immediately open the book and read the excerpts from the book aloud or will ask one of the trainees to read it for others. If the consensus or conclusion was not reached, the case was left open for further discussion and research. This is the first time I saw, learned and believed that even a professor can open a book, and ask the junior staff of their opinion. Prior to that the image for the professor was that of all knowing, all power. Only these meetings taught that those images were false. No one has abso-

lute knowledge except Allah and the challenges of medical knowledge are myriad and the complexity of medicine is such that everyone needs help of books and colleagues. Here was the first time I learned that it is OK to say 'I don't know'. These enormous lessons have perpetuated and have become second habit now alhamdulillah. Even today whenever a complex and difficult patient or decision is encountered, these lessons become guide and help solving the problems.

Golden Jubilee Celebrations

As we were graduating from Dow Medical College, it was time for the golden jubilee celebration of the college and centenary celebration of Civil Hospital, Karachi. Prof. Akhtar Ahmed was the chairman of scientific committee. I don't know why, but he asked me to join his team with some of my friends to help with the work of scientific committee. Being elated by the offer, I was able to convince several of my class fellows to join him for this task. Organizational skills, coordination and discipline were the hallmark of our effort. We learned a lot in the event, but one of the greatest rewards for us was the party that he hosted for us. He praised our work whole heartedly, and if anyone had doubts about his generosity, those melted away. We cherished everything about it for a long time. The chamchagiri consolidated.

Letter of Recommendation

When I was applying for training in USA, I asked him for a letter of recommendation. The contents of the letter made me feel like 'dream come true'. He wrote a brief but very positive letter which made me feel proud. However, the experienced USMLE and residency interview folks did not like that letter. They said it was very brief and did not give the details of my performance in the ward etc. etc. Looking at that letter even today, I feel proud and honored. He once told us a story of brief communication. He said an author with very good writings, once sent a letter to his publisher about the new book. The letter said "?", the answer came back "!". He himself was a man of few words, yet the words that came out were full of worth. I will be happy to get another such a brief letter, if I have to apply for residency training again.

Dr. Moeen Masood and my stay in USA

Coming from a background where there were not too many doctors around, I had to rely on advice of friends. With the help of my cousin, Mushtaque in Dallas, I was able to send many applications and got a decent number of interview calls. I told Prof. Akhtar Ahmed about that and he said I will talk to Moeen. Few days later I got the information about Dr. Moeen Masood and here I was one chilling cold night, slipping on the icy tracks of railway

station in Minneapolis, meeting Dr. Moeen Masood. I was afraid; I did not know how he will interact, how comfortable he will be keeping me, a total stranger in his home. But Prof. Akhtar Ahmed connection worked. I met this humble and nice man, who said one day Prof. Akhtar Ahmed called me and told me about you and asked for help in getting residency, and of course, I could not refuse. On the recommendation of Prof. Akhtar Ahmed you are here and I have arranged for your stay as well as observership in Minneapolis. It turned out that Dr. Moeen Masood was another mureed (disciple) of this clergy of neurology. The Prof. Akhtar Ahmed connection worked thousands of miles away in a totally strange place.

Dinner Invitation After Marriage

How often boss is the host? I was in the middle of my residency training when I came to Pakistan for marriage. I don't remember whether he attended the valima or not, however, Prof. Akhtar Ahmed was kind enough to invite me and my wife for a dinner. As far as I can remember, he asked Dr. Saleem Ilyas (now Professor of Neurology at Dow University) to organize the dinner. He invited several other people to the event. I can't describe how pompous I was in front of my wife as if I have conquered the world by receiving invitation from Prof. Akhtar Ahmed. I don't know how she felt, but the feeling of being invited by him can just not be put in words. Not to say the least, the dinner was one of the most lavish. Thank you Prof. Saleem Ilyas!

Visit to New Jersey

I stayed in contact through mail and phone with him and kept him updated about my activities during training. While I was doing my stroke fellowship in New Jersey, I received a call from him stating that he was visiting one of his daughters in a nearby city and would like to visit me. What a joy and pride it was for me to host him this time. The roles were switched and I just could not do enough to fulfill my role as the host. This time of course, I needed great support from my wife, and as always she was welcoming for this. We had one son at that time and I could see his love for little children at that time. While in medical school, we never imagine our revered professors as humans, doing things like playing with a child. I was astonished with his interactions with my son. One of the 2 days when he was with us, he asked me to join me in the hospital. I had already anticipated that and taken permission from my boss at that time Prof. Adnan Qureshi. He participated in the team rounds as an inquisitive observer. It was just amazing to see him attending the ward rounds like a novice medical student, asking questions to Prof. Qureshi, and admiring his work. I could not imagine one of the most renowned men in his

own area, being so humble in interactions with a much younger colleague, younger than many of his own trainees. There was a lot to learn for me in the interaction of two of the greats in the field.

The same night, it was my turn to be the host. I invited Prof. Qureshi and some of my colleagues to have dinner with Prof. Akhtar Ahmed at my home. Of course, it was the hard work and excellent cooking of my wife that got the most admiration, but I was jubilant with the thought that I have hosted Prof. Akhtar and Prof. Qureshi for dinner. I did not have loud speaker to announce it in the entire New Jersey. I wished he had stayed more with me but he had to return to his daughter. One of the treasures of his visit was his appreciation of my work. He probably said "I am glad that you are being recognized for your good work".

Lifetime Achievement Award and Prof. Akhtar Ahmed Lecture

When I returned to Pakistan after my training, one of my dreams was to become head of the neurology department of Civil Hospital, Karachi. I had eyed his chair and his room for a long time, however, Allah had other plans for me and I could work only for 3 months in the coveted department and had to leave. Once I joined Shifa International Hospital, Dr. Arsalan Ahmad (now Professor of Neurology), one of his disciples was there. It encouraged me and with his help and support, we were able to acknowledge him with a Lifetime Achievement Award on September 1, 2007. We arranged the 1st Neurology Research Day for Medical Students and Residents and invited him as the chief guest. We could not be happier the day we presented him with the Lifetime Achievement Award. He attended the event with his wife and family. We also started a lectureship in his name and invited Dr. Saleem Ilyas to deliver the first Prof. Akhtar Ahmed lecture. One can never repay parents and teachers; however, this was our modest way of acknowledging his greatness. I think he liked our effort. He appeared pleased.

Last Days

I always thought of him and wanted to visit him every time I came to Pakistan, but I had heard that he had become feeble. He had also developed Parkinsonism which was evident even the day when we gave him the Lifetime Achievement Award. I am so happy that Dow University acknowledged his work with Professional Excellence Award in March 2013. Although I did not attend the ceremony, but I am sure he must have been pleased and contented. I did not see him in his last days, which sometimes make me feel bad, but it also gives me a relief of a sort. I don't know how would have I reacted had I seen one of the icons in sick and feeble state.

I don't know whether it was the summary of khutba, the case of Rasmussen encephalitis, or something else which made him so kind and generous to me. I am one of the few who can claim that he opened the doors of knowledge and love without throwing a single stone and ever being harsh. I used to make other people jealous by saying Akhtar sahab nay mujheykabhinahindanta.

I cherish the memories of time spent with him. I know no matter how much and how many times I write about him, I cannot do justice. I wonder if Allah will continue to send majzoobslike him to the fraternity of medicine to keep the legacy of professional integrity, intellectual honesty, self discipline, and fountain of knowledge flowing.

Lives of great men all remind us,
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us,
Footprints on the sands of time.

Henry Longfellow

Some of you may be wondering what kind of writing is this. But this is how Prof. Akhtar Ahmed is placed in my heart and mind, and I just wanted to share with you the Prof. Akhtar Ahmed that I had known.

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