

Appreciation: Professor Ahmed Mohamed El Hassan

Dr Sowsan Atabani discusses the life and achievements of Professor Ahmed Mohamed El Hassan

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Professor Ahmed Mohamed El Hassan, who passed away in November 2022, was the pre-eminent pathologist in Sudan and beyond, with an international reputation as a pathologist of tropical diseases. He was affectionally known as the Father of Pathology by his colleagues and students. He dedicated his life to teaching, research and helping to serve those marginalised and disadvantaged by neglected diseases.

Born in 1930 in Berber, in what was previously referred to as Anglo–Egyptian Sudan, he graduated from the Kitchener School of Medicine in 1955 with distinctions and prizes in medicine and surgery, as well as receiving the Kitchener Memorial Prize as the most outstanding student of his year.

He was awarded the Diploma of Clinical Pathology in 1960 from the University of London, followed in 1964 with a PhD in Immunology from the University of Edinburgh. He was a founding member of Royal College of Pathologists and was the first Sudanese to be granted Fellowship in 1964. He was recognised as the first Sudanese Professor of Pathology in the University of Khartoum in 1966; he was elected as the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine in 1969 and Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of Khartoum.

From 1971–1972, he served as the Minister for Higher Education and Research and then, from 1972–1977, as the Chairman of the Medical Research Council, National Council for Research (NCR), Sudan. During that time, he helped establish the Tropical Medicine Research Institute at the NCR with its two arms: the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in Omdurman and the regional laboratory in Khartoum.

From 1977–1987, he was the Visiting Professor of Pathology and Chairman at the College of Medicine and Medical Sciences, King Faisal University in Dammam in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He returned to the Faculty of Medicine, University of Khartoum in 1988 as Professor of Pathology, when I had the good fortune to be tutored and mentored by him as a fourth-year medical student.

In 1993, he was instrumental in founding, and was the first director of, the Institute of Endemic Diseases at the University of Khartoum. The objectives of this institution were to undertake research on endemic diseases, train medical and paramedical staff and offer specialised services in endemic diseases. In addition, he taught and mentored Professor Ahmed Hassan Fahal and together they established the Mycetoma Research Centre in 1991, which provides diagnosis, medical and surgical care, prevention, research and education on this debilitating disease.

In 2003, he joined fellow scientists in forming the Leishmaniasis East Africa Platform. He remained Emeritus Professor of Pathology at both Institutes and a friend of the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi) until his death. The Ahmed Mohamed El Hassan Centre for tropical diseases in Dooka, Sudan, a study site for DNDi clinical trials, was named in his honour.

Throughout his career, he promoted the understanding of pathology as a crucial element that underpins all patient management, with a particular emphasis on the immunopathology and epidemiology of tropical and endemic diseases such as cutaneous and visceral leishmaniasis, schistosomiasis, mycetoma, leprosy and the infectious agents associated with nasopharyngeal carcinoma, Burkitt's lymphoma and oesophageal cancer.

He received research grant funding from the WHO Tropical Disease Research, EEC, the Wellcome Trust, The Danish International Development Agency and the Academy of Sciences for the Third World. He published more than 300 scientific papers in peer-reviewed journals.

He contributed to medical education and research capacity building, both in Sudan and wider afield, and was on the advisory committee for Health Research for the WHO. His pivotal contributions to medicine were recognised with the WHO Shousha Prize in 1986, the Order of Merit by the Government of Sudan in 1995, the Donald Mackay Medal from the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in 1996 and the Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohamed Al Maktoum Award for distinguished personalities in the Arab world in 2017–2018.

As medical students, he captivated us with his stories and descriptions which brought pathology to life, peppering his enthusiasm with his famous 'you know' catchphrase. He had a prodigious memory for faces and names, reminding me that we had first met in the mid-1970s when he was a guest of my parents, enjoying a picnic on the grounds of the Washington Monument as we watched the Independence Day fireworks. To this day, I wonder if that encounter made an indelible mark on his life, as his mentoring did on mine and so many others.

Professor El Hassan never really retired. He continued to publish articles and appear on Sudanese TV and radio, aiming to inform the general public on the impact of endemic diseases on health and societal development. Outside of pathology, Professor El Hassan played both oud and flute and published on the impact of music and poetry on wellbeing. He established the first medical photography and illustration unit in Sudan, and his interest in photography extended outside the field of medicine. He is survived by four daughters and ten grandchildren.

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