

The Legend of Dr. Abbo Hassan Abbo

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An eminent Obstetrician and Gynaecologist well known for his endeavours, especially repair of obstetric fistulas.

His teaching is memorable as it is always full of real stories. His students are keen to attend and many of them are inspired to join the speciality. His patients adore him for his caring light hearted approach.

Born in 1927 in Elobeid, Kordofan. Scarcity of education meant fierce competition even to join the Elementary school. There was only one school for which Kordofan and Darfor provinces compete and only thirty students are selected.

In 1947 he sat for and passed the Cambridge School Certificate Universal examination as there was no Sudanese local examination at the time. He studied Arts for a year at Khartoum University and decided to change his career and studied Medicine at Cairo University, qualifying in 1955.

He returned to Sudan following the Housemanship year .

In 1960-1963 he worked as a Registrar in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in Khartoum, Omdurman hospitals and West Middlesex hospital, UK.

Since 1963 he was appointed as a Consultant and worked in Khartoum, Omdurman and Kosti. From 1987 up to now he was selected as a Fellow in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, faculty of Medicine, University of Khartoum performing all the functions of obstetrics and gynaecology with special consideration to lectures, teaching, training and examination of both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

In 1983 he was selected as Fellow ad eundem FRCOG from the Royal college of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in UK. A fellowship that is only given to very renowned people in obstetrics

and gynaecology who have done something very outstanding and they are not many. He was also selected as FICS (Fellow of the International College of Surgeons).

In 1976 he was the founding member of the International Urogynaecology Association, Mexico city.

For 9 years he was a member of the Executive Board of the International Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

Former president of the Obstetrical and Gynaecological Society of the Sudan.

Current President of the Sudan Fertility Care Association.

At the age of 82 he still has daily teaching sessions to medical students of 3 universities.

He also has a monthly postgraduate lecture and every Sunday attends the Fistula Centre.

He also attends and participates by papers in all Congresses of the International Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecology which are usually held every three years in one of the different towns of the world from the year 1976 up to now. That is to say he participated in the following towns: Mexico city - Tokyo - Berlin - Rio de Janero (Brazil) - Caracass (Venezuela) - Copenhagen - Washington - Kuala Lumpur - Singapore - Montreal and San Francisco.

I managed to meet him in Sudan following a session with his medical students and he kindly spoke about his Fistula Centre and lifelong career.

The story of the Fistula Centre started in 1960. Then he was working as a Registrar to Dr.. Atabani- one of

the oldest Obstetricians in Sudan. There was a small Fistula ward which doctors used to skip when doing their round as it was considered a nursing problem and no treatment was available. Dr. Abbo recalls that he used to visit the fistula patients after the round and listen to them. He was very much touched by the fact that they were mostly very young women aged 18-30 years who were depressed, abandoned and had no hope of cure.

He said that his opportunity for change came in 1967 when he was appointed as Head of the Department at Khartoum hospital. Then there was a small Fistula ward and they started operating in the Main theatre. The number of patients started to increase and there was limited space; there were 2 patients in a bed.

Around the 70's the Fistula Ward was visited by Sister Emanuel from France. Her donations helped build the Ward and run a theatre.

The Ward had 20 beds . In 1972 he travelled to America and met the Black women Forum in California. Where he discussed with them the problem of the miserable fistula patients and the way to help them. They arranged a fund raising party in which the American Avery Brooks acted and sang. The party raised \$25,000; at that time it was real money.

He managed to complete the building, buy some of the important theatre equipment. He also spent 2 months in Ethiopia to exchange training on repairing Fistula with the well known Hamlins (Regnauld and Catherine Hamlins).

When back from Ethiopia, Sister Emanuel visited the Centre again and brought all the equipment and instruments needed.

It is worth mentioning that the patients used to be treated as outcasts and used to come walking from very remote areas when they heard about the Centre. They reached debilitated, anaemic, miserable and very depressed. Having lost a baby , divorced by the husband and above all with true incontinence. Many of them also came with a Drop foot as well due to the paralysis of the peroneal muscles. These women were very much cared for and very well looked after and then operated upon at the Centre. After being operated on they were given money to go back home.

Waiting patients not yet operated on were kept in the Fistula ward while those operated on were shifted to the Fistula centre.

Dr. Abbo approached the Ministry of Health to demand a supply of nursing staff but was informed that there was no funding.

After thinking it over he realised that the best nurses were among the patient themselves. He gave them simple instructions and asked them to call him if the urine catheter was not flowing.

They used to watch very well as they were keen for the operation to succeed. In the morning they used to report everything including comments like Dr. Abbo; the patient snuffed last night!

"The results were fantastic results despite that these nurses were illiterate", he said.

After 2 years the Ministry supplied nurses and doctors and training commenced at the Fistula Centre. The first to train was Dr. Hassan Ahmed Abdallah. Now all our Registrars in rotation can't complete their training without doing a shift in the "Fistula ward". Currently there are 5 expert Fistula Consultants trained in collaboration with Ethiopia. There are 60 beds and the Consultants operate daily treating all the patients in this country and neighbouring countries. Not less than 600 – 700 Fistula cases are tended to per year; with a success rate of around 85%. Dr. Abbo has also extended his work to neighbouring countries.

He was alarmed when he learnt that young Somali women with fistulas used to go in groups of 7-8 women and drown themselves in the Indian ocean as there was nobody to operate on them.

As a result of this; he spent 3 months in Somali Land operating on their fistulas and brought with him a Somali doctor and trained him in the Local Fistula Centre.

He also operated in Chad and brought 2 of their doctors to the Centre and they both had their MDs. The same happened in Yemen and Niger.

For 15 consecutive years he is used to travel for 2 weeks to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; where one week is spent lecturing and the other week is spent operating on their fistula patients.

"I think I have cleared all their fistulas!"

He also went to Iran; the homeland of Ibn Sina who referred to the fistula as “an untreatable condition where the patient would have to live with it till she dies”.

He proudly stated, “I was happy to tell them had he (Ibn Sina) lived he would have seen that it was treatable!”

He was also invited to visit Ethiopia, Sweden, USA (California, Sandiago, Denver), Pakistan, Thailand, Singapore, India and many other European and Asian countries to discuss the fistula problem.

The Fistula Centre was officially opened by the Head of State in 1989 and has since trained 100's of doctors.

It has been renamed as the “Dr. Abbo National Fistula and Urogynaecology Centre”. It is now multidisciplinary with input from Urologists as sometimes we need to transplant the ureter into the bladder. There are also Rectal surgeons for rectovaginal fistula and general urogynaecology for stress incontinence operations.

“I have been working for more than 50 years, have repaired thousands and thousands fistulas!”

The Centre is the second largest in Africa and the Middle-East. The largest is in Addis Abba, Ethiopia.

“My best moment is when the repair succeeds and the patient tells me she is *dry!*”

“The women look totally different 3 months after their operations and I barely recognise them. They usually re-marry and don't return to the first husband who abandoned them at the time of hardship. They also have children and live a normal life”.

“This always reminds me of the well known saying “Nothing on earth can surpass the happiness of a cured fistula pilgrim” and to add equally so , the operator who did the operation.”

“When the operation fails I myself like the patient feel miserable!”.

Vesicovaginal fistulais mostlyt seen; mainly after obstructed labour. The typical scenario is that it happens 7 days after delivery of a dead baby. The other cause is traumatic.

Circumcision does not cause the Fistula, it may only be a small contributory factor.

The Centre has been visited by many international visitors; Ingelman Sunbirg, Steuart Stanton and many other specialists from around the World.

During his last visit to UK he contacted Lord Patel who is responsible for all the Fistula problems in the whole world discussing with him our “world wide centre.”

Lord Patel and Professor Jamal Abu Elsrer who is now President of the International Federation of Obstetrics and Gynaecology will intentionally come to Sudan to visit the Centre and officially updrade it to a “world wide training centre”.

This will definitely be very gratifying to the Sudan.

There are also very small centres at Alfashir and at Kassala. Alot of help is still needed to open at least 2 more centres and to train more doctors and run more theatres.

It is worth mentioning that Dr. Abbo was the first Obstetrician to invite Dr. Jamal Abu Elsrer from Egypt for IVF treatment in 1986. The first IVF baby in Sudan was delivered the same year by Dr. Abbo by Caesarean-section in Khartoum clinic.

Upon being asked to state some ofhis memorable experiences, Dr. Abbo chose the experience of post-mortem Caesarean Section.

“I was a young specialist looking after the sister of a colleague Obstetrician. She came to me in the Antenatal clinic with pending Eclampsia. I told her she had to go with me in my car ow to the hospital right away, where she will receive sedation (we were using the lytic cocktail at that time) and I will deliver the baby. She refused as she had to go home to look after a congenitally abnormal child. I phoned her brother who also failed to persuade her.

I told him ifshe leaves I would no longer be responsible for her care.

Next morning I was doing my round when Dr. Alsheik Keinesh a Cardiologist came running to me and said our colleague's sister had died. I rushed with him to the Outpatient section, felt her abdomen and the baby was moving. I asked for a scalpel,

and I opened a longitudinal incision of the skin, cut the uterus and asked them to take the baby to theatre the only place where there is oxygen. I went to the funeral and although it was very sad we lost the mother, there was a sense of happiness that the baby girl was alive.

This girl has completed University and is now married with 2 children.

She is still called "daughter of Abbo" because of her miraculous birth. The issue which keeps me thinking is what we should do for congenitally abnormal babies. Nowadays we can detect abnormalities on scan and in a placelike Sudan there are no facilities to look after them. It is about time that religious leaders in Sudan, Muslims and Christians sit with us and we come out with action regards this issue".

His advice to Medical students and Junior doctors is that this speciality is fascinating.

"A career in Obstetrics and Gynaecology is very rewarding, listen to your patients, know their problems, wherever you are you can always with your motivation and even modest facilities make a difference".

The speciality is very badly needed in Sudan because the maternal mortality and morbidity is still high up to now. This could only be eradicated by dedicated Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. In addition to its being the most fascinating and rewarding speciality, as far as reward is concerned to all its aspects the financial aspect denotes the saying that says "All the money goes down to the pelvis!"

"My advice to all those who are specialising in Urogynaecology to visit our Fistula Centre to complete their experience and help others who are in need for them".

Dr. Abbo has one son and four daughters. His son; Dr. Hassan Abbo who is a Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, who is currently in Carry, Ireland and is married with 2 children. Eman his eldest daughter is also a Doctor. Iglal and Jihan are married and each have 2 children.

The youngest; Dalia, is an Embryologist and works with IVF centres in Sudan. She is also travelling to complete her PhD in South Africa.

Dr. Abbo was awarded a life time achievement award

by the International Urogynecological Association (IUGA) in Italy in 2009. He was honoured a PhD from University of Khartoum in the same year.

He still actively participates in International Congresses; the last of which was the XIX Figo World Congress of Gynecology and Obstetrics in October 2009 in Capetown, South Africa.

Dr. Abbo has been to UK 3 years ago where he underwent major heart surgery and happily he made an excellent recovery and is still contributing enthusiastically to the speciality. On behalf of all those he taught we remain grateful and wish him the very best.