

## Historical Perspectives

# Pioneers of paediatrics: Professor Salah Abdelrahman Ali Taha,

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## ABSTRACT

This article highlights the contributions of Professor Salah Abdelrahman Ali Taha (1927-1988), one of the pioneers in paediatrics in Sudan and Saudi Arabia. He graduated from Kitchener School of Medicine (renamed, Faculty of Medicine, University of Khartoum[U of K]) in 1952 and was awarded an MD from the U of K in 1973, having accomplished a survey on the prevalence and underlying causes of childhood malnutrition in 14 villages. His impact was remarkable in establishing child health services in Sudan and Saudi Arabia, and in laying the foundation of the Department of Pediatrics, College of Medicine, King Saud University. He was also an active researcher in various fields in child health, and was pioneering in those related to nutrition. Following his return to Sudan, Dr Salah A Taha was elected Member of Parliament from his rural district in Gezira State and was the Speaker of the House of Parliament in 1986.

## Key Words

Salah Abdelrahman Ali Taha; Pioneer of paediatrics; Sudan; Saudi Arabia; University of Khartoum Faculty of Medicine; King Saud University College of Medicine; Child health; Medical education.

Though Sudan was under condominium rule (British and Egyptian Governments), the British influence was dominant and the administration was almost exclusively British. To have the government machinery running, the nationals were educated and trained to run the civil service [1,2]. Hence, Gordon Memorial College (GMC) was started in different disciplines as needed by the civil service. To meet healthcare needs, Kitchner School of Medicine (KSM) was founded in 1924. Salah Ali Taha, who was born in 1927, graduated from this school in 1952, his group including the first two female Sudanese doctors (Figure 1)[3].

Unlike the other colonies of the British Empire, young graduates from the Universities of Cambridge

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**Figure 1 - Graduates of Kitchener School of Medicine in 1952. Dr Salah Abdelrahman Ali Taha (standing, third from right) and sitting are Dr Khalda Zahir (second from left) and Dr Zarouhi Sarkissian (second from right) , the first female graduates [3].**

and Oxford were selected and trained to lead the civil service in Sudan. Education and health care took high priority. Institutes of education contributed to the emergence of dedicated patriotic leaders in all walks of life. It was noticeable that the British did not dismantle the cultural architecture of the Sudanese people and their social fabric was undisturbed. Among the emerging national leaders was Abdelrahman Ali Taha, (Salah's father) who had his education at home and abroad. He worked closely with J. V. Griffith, the founder of the renowned Institute of Education At Al-Dweim in the White Nile State (Bakht Alruda; currently the University of Bakht Alruda)[4,5]. He was the first Sudanese minister of education during British rule. His son, Salah seemingly expressed the genes he inherited from his father. He was disciplined and dedicated to his professional national duties. One day his father and a British guest visited him in Kosti (in the White Nile State) where Salah was the doctor in charge of Kosti Hospital. While taking breakfast with Salah at his house, he had to leave them at the

table when it was time to start his ward round. The father told his guest that he was not upset but proud of his son who was more caring for his patients than parent and guest!

I was lucky after graduation in 1964 to have the opportunity to work as intern in pediatrics at Khartoum Teaching Hospital with Salah Taha soon after his return from UK after obtaining his MRCP (London, Edinburgh & Glasgow). Patients were many, rounds were lengthy and discussions were academically tough and in depth. Punctuality was to the minute and no delays of actions or attendance were acceptable. The ward rounds will not end by seeing all the patients. The kitchen and utensils and the bathrooms will be inspected too. Interns were expected to do the minor surgical procedures like venous cutdown, bone marrow aspiration and biopsy, lymph node and muscle biopsy, pleural and ascitic fluid aspiration. The time we spent in the wards was dictated by the needs of our patients.

In 1967 Salah was physician and pediatrician at

Wad Medani in Gezira. Malnutrition was prevalent in Gezira and Salah Taha spent tremendous effort in combating this disorder and his efforts reached far beyond hospital based care. He was closely associated with the community in rural areas. He undertook a survey in 14 villages in the Gezira farming region to determine the causes of malnutrition. He highlighted important contributing factors, which also applied to other communities in the Sudan. These included the decline of breast feeding, the rise in bottle feeding, lack of supplementary feeding, and low levels of immunisation against communicable diseases. He

suggested that these contributing factors could be corrected immediately. Based on this research, he was awarded an MD from the University of Khartoum (U of K) in 1973. The Sudan Gezira Board was a strong institution with great facilities. With their help, Salah Taha was able to hold an International Sudanese Paediatric Conference in Wad Medani in 1968. The Conference was addressed by The Sudan President and attended by the Minister of Health, as well as Salah's father (Figure 2)! Few years later a similar conference was held in Port Sudan in which Salah Taha played pivotal role [7]. His experiences



**Figure 2 - Dr Salah Taha was able to hold an International Sudanese Paediatric Conference at Wad Medani in 1967. The Conference was addressed by The Sudan President , Ismail Alazhari (standing ) and attended by the Minister of Health (Dr Abdelhameed Salih, second from left), as well as Salah's father (Abdelrahman Ali Taha, fifth from left). Attending also was Dr Ali Badri (the first Sudanese Minister of Health, first from left) and Dr Abdel Halim Mohamed (fourth from left, the first Sudanese to be a member and fellow of the Royal College of Physitians, in London, in 1948; and Member of Sudan Presidential Council [6]).**



in Sudan laid the foundation for several later publications on malnutrition, foetal growth and the role of comprehensive child care centers [8-13].

In the late seventies of last century, Salah Taha left the country and worked in the United Arab Emirates. At that time, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was launching huge developmental schemes in all walks of life in which education took precedence. A college of Medicine at King Saud University (Riyadh University then) was in its dawn.

It is said that circumstances alter cases. A young Sudanese paediatrician who just finished his training in the UK happened to join the College of Medicine in Riyadh as a faculty in paediatrics. He was thoughtful and full of enthusiasm, aspiration, insight and sincerity. To him experience, will and desire were prerequisite for success. He relentlessly persuaded Salah Taha to join him to establish a department of paediatrics. Dr. Abdelwahab Elidrissy strongly believed in this goal and time proved him right when Salah Taha agreed to join him and lead the Department of Pediatrics. The fruits soon came when Elidrissy identified, in collaboration with Prof Salah Taha, the existence and epidemiological impact of vitamin D deficiency in a sunny location like Saudi Arabia [14]. Salah Taha could also persuade other young Sudanese paediatricians who had just finished their training in the UK to join as well. It was miraculous to have such a group of young paediatricians to nurture the Department. They were (Zein Karrar, Mohamed Ahmed Abdullah, Malik Babikr, and Awad Mahdi). They were highly professional and proficient and made Elidrissy and Salah Taha's dreams come true and the Department was exemplary. He was their mentor in several joint research projects [15-24]. The Department of Pediatrics was repeatedly evaluated as the best clinical department in the College and so it remained through the years, and that momentum is still keeping it atop. Best graduates often chose to take

paediatrics as their specialty, and residency training in the Kingdom was first started in this department.

In the late seventies of last century (1979), there were few paediatricians in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and there was urgent need to improve and upgrade health care services for children. It was thought that to create a diploma in child health that takes one year would be, though inadequate, of great help to improve children health care. Salah Taha helped and joined efforts with the local authorities to convince Prof. Forfar from Edinburgh [25] and other paediatricians from Scotland to help in this diploma by regular teaching at Maternity and Children Hospital in Riyadh.

Salah Taha had always expressed his tendency to train the young nationals to be future leaders. In the College of Medicine, several of the leaders (Dean, Vice-deans) were from the members of the Pediatric Department. In other health care institutions, up and down the Kingdom, the Department's contribution in staffing or leadership was often evident. Salah Taha showed no animosity to his critics. His students and colleagues often spoke of him with admiration and affection.

In a Department of Pediatric board meeting, Salah's proposal that it was high time to apply for establishing a Saudi paediatric association was approved. The Department Board nominated Salah and Dr. Abdelrahman Al Sweilim, then the Director of Children and Maternity Hospital, to approach authorities for approval which was achieved sometime later.

In Riyadh, he maintained his active joint research [26-28] and participated in international conferences on child health. One of these was the 17th International Paediatric Association Conference in Manila, The Philippines held in November 1983 (Figures 3 and 4). During this conference, the UNICEF launched the Child Survival Revolution with emphasis on growth monitoring, oral rehydration therapy, breast feeding, immunization and female education and family



**Figure 3 - At the Dinner of the 17th International Paediatric Association Conference in Manila (November 1983), The Phillipines. Prof Salah Taha (second from left ) in a discussion with Prof Hafiz Elshazali (Ex-President of the Sudan Association of Paediatricians [SAP] and current Member of the Sudanese Journal of Paediatrics [SJP] Editorial Board). Far left: Prof Abelmoneim Elseed (Ex-President of SAP and former Editor- in – Chief of SJP). Second from right : Prof Mustafa Abdalla M Salih (current International Editor of SJP).**



**Figure 4 - At the 17th International Paediatric Association Conference in Manila (November 1983). Prof Salah Taha (right) in a discussion with Prof Mustafa Abdalla M Salih (current International Editor of SJP).**

spacing. The impact of this was far outreaching and proved later to be a key instrument of international development [29-30]. It boosted in Sudan the recommendations of the Committees at the Sixth Conference of the Sudan Association of Paediatricians

(SAP) which was held in EI Fao in December 1982. “This small town - being a budding settlement area in a large newly-born agricultural project - was chosen to symbolize the theme of the conference i.e. priorities in primary health care. The conference

has been designed by the organizing committee in the form of a workshop to discuss and formulate specific recommendations to help shaping a national plan regarding the pressing issues of child health in the Sudan. During the three days of the workshop, participants - including most of SAP members and representatives of distinguished local and international bodies dealing with child health - took active part

in the three committees to which the workshop has been divided. These dealt with diarrhoeal diseases, malnutrition and immunization.”[31].

On his return to Sudan, Salah was elected Member of Parliament from his rural district in Gezira State and was the Speaker of the House of Parliament. He died after a short illness in August 22, 1988.

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