

## How do you even begin to pay a tribute to a larger-than-life legend?

It's now over a week since the shocking news of my dear teacher Prof Ashfaq Ahmad Khan's passing away reached me. I am used to loss, but the suddenness of such events inevitably leaves a sense of numbness and disbelief. It still seems so unreal given that I just met him three months ago in Peshawar at the Pediatric Conference where he looked well. He had come to attend the inaugural session on Nov 24 to listen to what I had to say, even though some laid a wager that he wouldn't come. To one such person I said that he never once refused an invitation extended by me, not even when he ostensibly slipped out of public view following the tragic untimely loss of his son Sohrab.

I have been meaning to say a few things about Prof Ashfaq but couldn't bear penning words which seem so perfunctory in describing a giant of our times. Prof Ashfaq was much more than a teacher and elder to me, and his roles changed over the years. During clinical rotations at Khyber Medical College, we often stood in awe of his towering personality. He taught pediatrics with passion and clarity and was often both stern as well as forgiving. Having been at the receiving end of his tongue lashing a few times, I learnt fast not to speak out of turn or loosely. Following graduation, he was briefly upset with me for a few years as I chose to train in Pediatrics at JPMC Karachi, rather than continue at the Khyber Teaching Hospital, but soon forgave the move. As to my reasons for doing so at that time nearly half a century ago, that's the subject for another day.



I got to know Prof Ashfaq and Dr Yasmin well also through Dr Sohail Sahibzada (my dear departed class fellow and childhood friend), who was his brother-in-law. We were neighbors in University Town Peshawar, and our paths crossed often during my college days. Following my move to UK for training, where Sohail also arrived, there was periods when Dr Ashfaq spent short stints of time in the early 80s in the UK where we would regularly communicate. In 1983 I spent a few months as a consultant pediatrician in Merthyr Tydfil in Wales where he had served as a pediatrician a year earlier and was struck by how highly the staff and physicians regarded him, and considered his bedside communications with patients and families, exceptional.

He was not only an outstanding clinician but determined to place pediatrics among the mainstream disciplines. The subject of Pediatrics in Pakistan owes so much to him and a few others for getting it the due recognition it deserved. When I returned to Pakistan in 1986, it was evident that Prof Ashfaq was among the lead

persons developing consensus on Pediatrics becoming a major subject, and through their untiring efforts, they succeeded amidst great odds and challenges at the Pakistan Medical & Dental Council.

A notable feature of Dr Ashfaq's career was also the blend of hospital based pediatrics as well as a clear eye on public health priorities for the country. With his two towering pediatric faculty members Prof Mehr Taj Roghani and Dr Tasleem Akhtar by his side, he lent his support to several landmark studies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. He led some of the first studies on nutrition and complementary feeding in the province, underscoring the need for nutrition interventions,



something that we still struggle with. A strong advocate of childhood immunizations and preventive strategies, he played a key role in the expansion of child health and referral services in the province and quality of care. The image above from 2014 is from a dissemination event on polio eradication and community outreach in Peshawar. It also has some of my beloved teachers (Prof Nasiruddin Azam Khan, Prof Alaf Khan and Prof Lala Rukh Alaf Khan) who came especially to give their inputs.

Notwithstanding Prof Ashfaq's contributions to the Pakistan Pediatric Association, which he helped steer, he was the face of Pakistan pediatrics globally for a long time. A member of the executive committee and council of the International Pediatric Association, he assisted global pediatrics in multiple ways. I personally witnessed him lugging heavy files and boxes of documents at several IPA Congresses in Rio (1992), Amsterdam (1998) and Beijing (2001) to name a few. When I was nominated to the IPA council in 2004, it was Dr Ashfaq who held my hand at the very first meeting in Geneva and provided invaluable insights into the working of global child health policy. Throughout my own journey within the rank and file of IPA and regional work, I could always call upon him for advice and he gave it freely and generously. He will forever be ranked among the pioneering leaders who modernized IPA and made it effective.

At a personal level he was all that a student can ever seek in a teacher and mentor, who over the years rises also to the rank of a trusted friend and counsel. He was kind and considerate and made time for me whenever approached, when time is the singular precious asset that people cherish. I will miss him tremendously personally and Pakistan pediatrics and child health feel his loss forever.



He would often tell me that he took great pride in telling people in international meetings that he was my teacher. My usual and heartfelt response was always that the honor and pleasure was mine to be ranked in that category.

Rest in peace my teacher, mentor, colleague, advisor and importantly, a dearest cherished friend.