

# In memory of Abdel Moneim Ashour a forgotten pioneer of Geriatrics and Psycho geriatrics in Arab world

By

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**Abstract:** Professor Abdel Moneim Mahmoud Ashour started his brilliant career after graduating in 1957 from Kasr al-Aini faculty of Medicine, as a Physician officer in the Egyptian Medical Corps in 1958 to start an 18 year military medical carrier. In 1977, he left the Egyptian Medical Corps as a Colonel to join Ain Shams faculty of Medicine as a lecturer of neuropsychiatry and continued his academic carrier for another 20 years. He kept working after retirement as an Emeritus Professor and joining the voluntary community work for another 21 years till he passed away on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2015. He was a living example of active ageing.

No one can write adequately about the unique personality of Professor Abdel Moneim Ashour. He was active in multidisciplinary frontiers of knowledge and services that are all related to elderly care. He has left us a huge legacy to the extent that wherever you dig, you still find treasures of success stories or trails that were not completed to promote elderly care in Egypt. Luckily, in 2011 he has written a diary – but not a classic diary – aiming to set examples for the youth and to inspire the Egyptian revolution of 2011[1]

## **Personal growth and Family life of Professor Ashour:**

He was born in 1934 to an Egyptian family. His father was a Railway Engineer and his mother was a house wife. He was the eldest son of 8 brothers and sisters. During his early childhood he witnessed the World War II, the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, last years of the Kingdom of Egypt with all rich life experiences gained during this period.

His father's job in the Egyptian railway authority dictated the continuous travel and change of residence every few years. No doubt this has enriched the life experience of Ashour as he lived in different rural and urban cities. He was able to interact since early childhood with all social classes in the Egyptian society plus meeting all social components in Egypt in that time including the Copts, Jews, Non-Egyptian Arabic residents, Greeks in Egypt. He shared his experience in his "Diaries" [1].

## **Education and scientific background of Professor Ashour:**

He was a smart student. He was exempted from first year of primary education due his high preparedness for school then he finished his primary school by ranking the first. He continued his excellence and graduated from high school of Assuit in 1950 ranking the first on his school and on upper Egypt [1].

His excellence granted him qualifying for the scholarship exam of the Egyptian universities where he ranked the 2<sup>nd</sup> among the 20 candidates. So he was exempted from University costs. As many Egyptians in last century he wished to be a lawyer. Perhaps this is why he kept advocating for elderly. He also mentions he has dreamed of being a Physician while a child. So he chose to enter the school of medicine [1].

## **His Medical carrier:**

He has graduated from Cairo University (Kasr al-Aini) faculty of medicine in 1957. Although he was not obliged to take military career but he volunteered to join the Military Academy in 1958. After which

he started an 18 years of service in the Egyptian Medical Corps. During his military service, he joined military units in the field armies and worked in several Military Hospitals. He has witnessed the Yemeni war 1963, 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Attrition war and 1973 Arab-Israeli war. One of the impressive watersheds in Ashour life was witnessing the retreat of the Egyptian Army and his coming near death in Mitla mountain pass in the 6<sup>th</sup> of June 1967. He remarks this moment by referring to it as his "Second birth". After which he decided to work harder and to ask no one but Allah for help [1].

During his military medical career he has finished two diplomas in internal medicine and Psychiatry. Then finished his Medical doctorate thesis on November 1967 and earned his Medical Doctorate in Psychiatry from Ain Shams University in 1971. Due to his excellence he became part of Dr Herbert Olivecrona (father of Neurosurgery) team (1) during his stay in Egypt in the 1960s [2]. He succeeded in becoming a member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in 1973 and later on in 1991 became a Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists [1,3].

### **Professor Ashour Leaving Militaria and joining Academia:**

After the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and starting of peace negotiations he left the military service in 1976 to join Ain Shams University as a Lecturer of Neurology and Psychiatry at the Faculty of Medicine [1]. One year later in 1977 he traveled on a Postdoctoral Scholarship in Geriatrics in Birmingham University in UK for one year [3]. He described UK as the pioneer citadel of seniors care in the whole world [1]. He chose to break into the field of elderly care including Geriatric medicine and old age Psychiatry. The choice was to fill in a gap of knowledge, services and academic interest in Egypt during that time [1]. During his scholarship, he had the opportunity to gain knowledge directly from the original sources and also to interact with other international colleagues. The interaction with his colleagues produced later on the International Psychogeriatrics association.

### **Achievements in Ain Shams University:**

#### a) Establishing the International Psychogeriatrics Association:

After return to Egypt he started his struggle to introduce geriatric medicine into Egypt. He was promoted to Assistant Professor in 1981. He then adopted the organization of the first conference of the International Psychogeriatrics association (IPA) in 1982[4]. Despite the fact that the conference had some difficulties but *Sanford Finkel* (the former president of American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry and first president of IPA) quotes: "It was clear that the infrastructure for an organization had been created; thanks to the work of Imre, Hans and Abdel Ashour" [5].

So IPA was born and Prof Ashour mentioned that he was the one that suggested adding the ancient Egyptian sun to its logo as it symbolizes the rise of mental health and wisdom. He was recognized as one of the World Five Fathers of Geriatric Psychiatry in Sweden 1985 [6]. In 1986 he was promoted to a Professor of Neurology and Psychiatry at Ain Shams University.

#### b) Establishing the Geriatric unit:

He has established with others the Geriatric medicine unit in Ain Shams University in 1984 to provide clinical service for Egyptian elderly. In order to pave the road for establishing an academic program for Geriatrics and Gerontology in Ain Shams University, he has started an exchange program with Minnesota University under the Fulbright Commission in 1992. This cooperation helped execution of at least 6 courses in Egypt during the period (1992-1999) [7] plus the repeated travel of at least 4 Professors from Minnesota university to Ain Shams university and vice versa [1].

#### c) Establishing Postgraduate degrees in Geriatrics and Gerontology:

He has established the first national and regional Geriatric Medicine degrees in Egypt and Arab world: Master of Science (MSc) and Medical Doctorate (MD)

academic programs in Ain Shams University in 1994 [1].

Geriatric medicine in Egypt started by individual initiatives from pioneers in different disciplines: Prof Ashour is one of the Pioneers of introducing Geriatric medicine to Egypt and the Arabic region; He is accredited for establishing the first outpatient Geriatric medicine unit, along with Prof Mohammed Essam Fekry (Alexandria faculty of Medicine) who is accredited for introducing the Geriatric medicine into undergraduate medical curricula and authoring several books in Geriatric medicine (Also Alexandria University had the first inpatient department in Egypt); Prof Mohammed Sabbour (Ain Shams faculty of Medicine) is accredited for authoring the first book on Geriatric medicine in 1978 [8]; And Dr Abdo Mahmoud Sallam was the first president of the ESG after establishing it in 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1988 [9,10]. Prof Ashour was the one that gave a major push and surge to the Geriatric medicine and old age psychiatry in Egypt so he was nominated for the State Excellence Prize by the Neuropsychiatry department in 1995 [3]. But he received no prizes. He comments on this by saying: "My prize is seeing the continuous growth of my projects and the progress of my students" [1]. But Ain Shams faculty of Medicine later on has honored him in 2013 by giving him the honoree of the Pioneers in medicine during the annual conference.

d) Establishing other Geriatrics academic units:

For many years (1984-2007) Ain Shams Geriatric medicine and Gerontology unit and department along with Alexandria Geriatric medicine unit remained the only academic units in the Egyptian universities and the whole Arabic region. In 2007 Mansoura University faculty of Medicine started establishing its Geriatric medicine and Gerontology department with help of Ain Shams University.

The Ain Shams Geriatrics and Gerontology unit has metamorphosed starting from 1996 [1] into an academic department which continued its growth until today. Nowadays it has its own undergraduate academic

medical curricula (and contributing to undergraduate nursing education), postgraduate academic degrees, Geriatrics & gerontology residency program (including a 12 months Geriatric intensive care rotation), subspecialty units (Osteoporosis management unit and Geriatric intensive care unit), plus expanding its inpatient and outpatient services. This would not have been accomplished if it not has been for the efforts of Prof Ashour and his successors.

e) Retirement and Psychogeriatrics efforts:

After retirement in 1995 he continued his academic mission as a Professor Emeritus. Due to several reasons he chose to leave his offspring in Geriatric medicine unit, but he kept an eye on it from a distance. He "retreated" to the Psychiatry department. He has transferred the "know how" to Helwan university and established the Centre for Social and Health Care of elderly in 1997. He also founded the Geriatric Psychiatry Research Unit at Institute of Psychiatry of Ain Shams University in 1998. During which he concentrated more on voluntary work in NGOs, as he established the Alzheimer Egypt Society in 1998 [1].

He has also established the Psychogeriatrics unit in Abbasyia mental health hospital in 2006 [11] which set the first model for establishing other Psychogeriatrics units in the Egyptian Ministry of Health later on.

f) Voluntary efforts with Non Governmental associations (NGOs):

He had a philanthropic personality and was active on the NGOs sector. He was a member of several national and international societies. He was an establishing member of the Egyptian Society for Elderly care, the Egyptian society for elderly health in 1982, and Egypt Alzheimer society in 1998 [12]. He insisted and persisted on having a monthly meeting of "Alzheimer café" regardless of his obligations or health status. In the meeting there would be open discussions, consultations, workshops and presentations

on caring for persons with dementia and caring for carers (caregivers). He also was bearing the burden of organizing the World Alzheimer day in Egypt through the Alzheimer Egypt society yearly.

g) Contribution to scientific literature:

He was peer reviewer in several scientific journals. He had many scientific articles published in peer reviewed international journals (See appendix). Ashour was a "polymath" academic with an expertise that spans a significant number of different subject areas, all dedicated to Seniors' care. This is reflected in his supervision of several Master and Doctorate theses (both in Science and in Arts) on the fields of Geriatric medicine, Psychiatry, Psychology, Fine arts, Physical exercise, nutrition and nursing in Egypt and in the Arab world (See appendix).

He has written and coauthored several books (See appendix) and book chapters both in Arabic and English. Perhaps his last book that contained his diaries is very inspiring to other people.

He also was very interested in raising the awareness by issuing bulletins about elderly care, geriatric medicine (Sawt al-Zaman) in 1995 [13], dementia care (Alzheimer Egypt bulletin) in 1999 [14]. He also triggered and supervised the foundation of the Alzheimer Egypt website [15].

As an Expert and developer of elderly care service he was member of the team that made the National strategy and action plan of elderly care in Egypt in 2007 [16].

h) Ashour and Elderly care promotion:

Ashour was very interested on disseminating the culture of caring knowledge, attitudes and skills to the Egyptian and Arabic society. One mean to help this was by organizing Caregivers (for both elderly or Dementia caregivers) training courses by the help of Ain Shams Geriatrics unit, Alzheimer Egypt society, Helwan university Center for elderly care, and several other NGOs [1].

He was keen in networking, raising awareness, lobbying, spreading knowledge,

advocating, and marketing for elderly care through conferences. He has organized many conferences as the First international conference of IPA in 1982; Ain Shams conference of Geriatrics & Gerontology 1988; several conferences in collaboration with Minnesota university, Egyptian Medical society, Ain Shams Geriatrics unit; and in 2012 the Middle East and North Africa Conference of Alzheimer's disease international conference [17].

Ashour was a knight fighting all his life for promoting elderly care. Despite having several drawbacks in his health status since 2009, he insisted on finalizing his last project by establishing the professional learning certificate of psychogeriatrics in Ain Shams Institute of Psychiatry (18). It was established as a "super-specialty" that crystallizes his development of a unique psychogeriatrics methods and principles, bringing about gerontology, geriatric medicine, psychology, sociology and old age Psychiatry in to a single interface. This was his last accomplishment [1].

i) Ashour and active ageing:

He was an excellent example of active Ageing. Despite having some health drawbacks, he kept actively fighting for the cause of elderly care in Egypt until the last day of his life. He is remembered as a philanthropic, good and generous man. He has left an established academic legacy in a well established department with great number of students and faculty of Geriatric medicine and old age psychiatry disseminating knowledge and services all over Egypt and the Arab world. He continued his efforts of advocacy for Persons with Dementia and elderly until the end of his life in 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2015.

## Conclusion

Professor Abdel Moneim Ashour was a polymath, brilliant academic, and dedicated fighter for promoting elderly care services in an under serviced country as Egypt inside and underprivileged areas (Arab world). He is considered the true pioneer of Geriatric medicine and Psychogeriatrics in Egypt and the Adult world.

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## **Appendix:**

### **Articles, Thesis and Books**

#### **Articles**

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