

Archives of Surgical Research | Feature Interview

Becoming Sir Khawaja: A Product of Model Mentorship and Menteeship

Zaitoon Zafar

IMPORTANCE "Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction." — John Crosby

Prof Khwaja Azeem is one of the finest surgeons in the country who believes in quality of care and surgical education. We had the opportunity to interview him on the his 67th Birthday. This interview highlights on the impact of mentorship and role modeling in the life of a surgeon. This interview although gives personal account but has important lessons for the students and trainees are pursuing surgical career.

Feature Interview

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The Great Sir Khwaja has - unbeknownst to me - scheduled his interview with me on his 67th birthday. As I enter his room 3 cakes adorn his table, his daughter on his left & his protegee, Dr. Talat, on his right. Other spaces are taken up by students; all inspired & intimidated by him, in equal amounts. He is wearing his scrubs and answering professional calls, as others celebrate his birthday for him. I ask him later if he had considered today would be his birthday when we were scheduling, he replies, "today is a

Wednesday, beta". In contrast to his domineering personality in operation theaters and lecture halls, he is an eager host and is worried whether everyone received an equal share of cake.

Sir Khwaja Mohammad Azim was born on the 2nd of September, 1953 in Kashmiri Bazar, an area within the Walled City of Lahore. Being the second child and the first son of his parents, becoming a doctor was expected of him, a task he took in stride. After graduating from GCU, Lahore in 1971, he enrolled at Nishtar Medical University (NMU), Multan. At Nishtar is where he met Professor Zafar Haider, the man who would direct the course of his life.

WHEN THE STUDENT IS READY, THE TEACHER WILL APPEAR

"One of the greatest values of mentors is the ability to see ahead what others cannot see and to help them navigate a course to their destination." — John C. Maxwell

Professor Zafar Haider was the Head of Department of Surgery at NMU, where he started mentoring Sir Khwaja, mainly during Sir's year as a House Officer, after which he offered Sir Khwaja the position of Senior Registrar at Nishtar Hospital in the year 1979. Professor Zafar Haider relocated to Lahore the same year, where he was appointed as Professor of Surgery at King Edward Medical University (KEMU). At Mayo Hospital, Professor Zafar Haider performed the first parathyroidectomy in Punjab. Following in his steps was a talented & promising student he had not forgotten. On the 17th of January, 1980, Sir Khwaja was appointed as a Registrar at Mayo Hospital, South Surgical Ward, under the patronage of the pioneer Professor.



After clearing his MCPS towards the end of 1980, Sir Khwaja was offered the job of Senior Registrar. During this time, Professor Zafar Haider moved from the South to the East Surgical Ward (ESW), and naturally, Sir Khwaja followed. The Professor made the ESW the hub of thyroid surgery, performing over two thousand thyroidectomies. At his right-hand side learning and witnessing such trail blazing was our Sir Khwaja.

The Professor then tasked Sir Khwaja with pursuing a fellowship in surgery from the UK. Sir went to Edinburgh in 1983 to complete his Part One, but soon returned to Pakistan, only to be sent back by the Professor to gain work experience from the UK, "go and see how state-of-the-art institutes function".

Sir Khwaja obtained his Fellowship in October 1986 from Royal College of Physicians of Glasgow and worked in various hospitals around the UK, from Ireland to London. Sir returned to Lahore (and to his mentor) to be appointed Assistant Professor of Surgery in March 1987 at KEMU. Within 5 years he was offered the job of Associate Professor of Surgery and was finally appointed as a Professor of Surgery in 2005 at KEMU, a role he fulfilled until 2013. A day after his retirement from KEMU, he started working at Shalamar Institute of Health Services, a move also credited to Professor Zafar Haider, as he served as honorary consultant to Shalamar Hospital for ten years following his retirement, and encouraged Sir Khwaja to join the institute as it "served the poor and had diversity of pathology".

Sir lowers his voice and looks down solemnly as he talks extensively about his Professor, "he was my master, my mentor, my spiritual father. I have learned a lot from him. I only followed in the footsteps of my great teacher". He considers himself blessed to have received one-on-one training from him. He claims his interest in surgery also developed when he saw how committed and dedicated Professor Zafar Haider was to his job as a teacher, "he was the teacher of teachers. I have not seen a greater teacher in Pakistan".

THE STUDENT BECOMES THE MASTER

Sir Khwaja considers being a teacher one of his roles in life, a responsibility he appreciates in its fullness; "this is how nations are built". He has mentored multiple talented students throughout his life, from Prof Ashfaq Ahmad, Professor Ameer Afzal of KEMU, Professor Akram Dogar of Central Park Medical College, and numerous other consultant surgeons, assistant professors at KEMU, SIMS, Lahore General Hospital. "They are carrying on the candle I took from Professor Zafar Haider".

When it comes to his final relay, he is most proud, "I have tried to transfer all of my teacher's teachings on to Talat, he

is superb. There is no one better than him in this town. This is my last and best protegee". Sir considers his student a blessing to him.

Following interview, I sought a brief input by Sir Talat about Prof Khwaja Azim.

"I have worked with many great people like, Stanley W Ashley, Malcolm K Robinson, Edward Whang, Evan Matros, Mark Duxbury, Hiromichi Ito from Harvard Medical School, Paul Redmond from University of Cork and many great people, but found Prof Khwaja Azim best of them all! He is the most meticulous, passionate and self-efficacious of them all. His hard work, belief in perfection and his way of self-quality assurance are outstanding.

He truly believes in the idea of mentorship in surgery and it has worked for him and his disciples. His surgical skill is enormous, unmatched and exemplary." says Sir Talat, who then provides personal insights he has gathered over the years:

"He has certain important qualities, which make him who he is:

- He is a perfectionist and is clear in his objectives, he is happy when he achieves them and is NOT when he does not! He lands in operation theater every morning with one single thought, 'today I am going to do the best operation of my life'.
- He has an innate quality to rise again and again from a crisis, and very quickly. He rejuvenates in a very short time span following a surgical crisis and is soon filled with hope again. His self-efficacy is impeccable.
- He is daring and willing to take risks and has finessed the art of managing risks associated with the sequelae.
- He has tremendous energy and can work with passion for hours! Even at the age of 67.
- He knows his strengths very well and knows how to capitalize on them.

So, becoming Professor Khwaja Azim is not simple and easy. He is the product of obedience to his mentors, hard-work, belief in perfection, self-efficacy and a big dose of courage."

THE LINEAGE (AS TOLD BY SIR KHWAJA)

1. Professor Dr. Ameer Uddin: As the Professor of surgery at Mayo Hospital during Partition, Dr Ameer provided treatment services for those who got injured while migrating. He was also a philanthropist, and reportedly sold out his residence at Gulberg to contribute to the establishment of the Department of Pediatric Surgery at Mayo Hospital. The government awarded him with the title of Emeritus Professor of Surgery. He was considered to be

one of the top 20 surgeons of the world, and recently a medical college was named after him.

2. Professor Dr. Zafar Haider: Graduate of King Edward Medical University, 1950. He opted to become a surgeon after being influenced by his teacher and mentor, Professor Dr. Ameer-ud-din. He obtained his FRCS in 1957 & trained under the likes of Hamilton Stewart and John Charnley. He was a general surgeon in addition to being competent in cardiothoracic, orthopedic, urology & oncological surgery, he felt it was necessary to be trained in multiple fields for a recently established and young country, Pakistan. His main field, however, was endocrine, specifically the thyroid and parathyroid.

3. Professor Dr. Khwaja Azeem: Graduate of Nishtar Medical University, 1976, he was inspired by Professor Dr. Zafar Haider's discipline and commitment to his students to become a surgeon. Appointed Professor of Surgery at King Edward Medical University in 2005 until his retirement in 2013. Then started Professorship of Surgery at Shalamar Medical & Dental College till present.

4. Professor Dr. Ameer Afzal: Professor of Surgery at King Edward Medical University, a student of Sir Khwaja Azeem. He recently led the earthquake relief operation in Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

5. Dr. Talat Waseem: Current Associate Professor of Surgery at Shalamar Medical & Dental College, he is a Consultant Surgical Oncologist & Endocrine Surgeon, who completed his Postdoctoral Fellowship Surgical Research from Harvard Medical School.

THE TOOLS OF THE MASTER

"A person should be morally, professionally, financially incorruptible" Sir Khwaja exclaims, "this is what you need to be successful". His life's philosophy is of a simple and honest man, he does not believe in pride or ownership, "do not take pride in whatever is given, and do not cry over what is taken". With an unwavering faith in Allah, who he calls

"If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." — Isaac Newton

upon repeatedly, he believes he has cleared all obstacles. It is surprising to hear from Sir Khwaja himself that there were days he felt like running away, but he dismisses the possibility of that actually happening with "just keep busy. When tense, leave it to Allah, what else can a man do?"

He says he is fond of talking and holding discussions, and even uses it as an outlet when tired or bored. He believes one must not go to sleep without reading, "even if it is an Urdu digestive", and still continues to study and revise surgery lessons for at least 2 hours a day. Sir's morning routine consists of waking up early for Fajr, then going for a walk, and returning to recite the Holy Quran.

Sir Khwaja holds a strong belief in being steadfast and leaving the rest up to Allah, "do not get distracted, have clarity of mind, consult others, but stick with your decision once you make it. Allah will open all doors for the path you decide to take". He is also a strong proponent of merely trying, he says trying is what will determine whether you will achieve a goal or not.

"There is no substitute for hard work. Believe in your destiny, work hard and honestly in order to fulfill it". When asked if he has had to make any sacrifices to get to the position he is, "no, my wife has". She is the only other person apart from Professor Zafar Haider he credits with his success in life.

LAST WORD

When asked if reaching Sir Khwaja's level of success is possible without a stout mentor, he believes it is simply not possible; "you will be shooting aimlessly in life". He considers having a mentor one of fate's biggest blessings and equally influential as having parents. Recalling upon Professor Zafar Haider speaking of his own mentor, Professor Dr. Ameer-ud-din, "if I hadn't chanced upon Dr. Ameer-ud-din, I would have ended up a street vendor". Sir Khwaja holds the same belief in regards to his master.