

## **Zohair Nooman: A Personal Memoir**

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Zohair Nooman has died.

The message shocked me. One tends to believe that great men are immortal; that they have a special feat that makes them stand the erosion of time. I should have been forewarned though. The last time I saw him, at a conference in Bahrain in 2000, he looked frail and paltry, consequences of a long disease that had plagued him. We spoke briefly; I had to chair a meeting. And yes, he was all right.

Let me tell you about Zohair Nooman, about the kind of man he was.

I met him and his wife and lifelong collaborator Esmat Ezzat for the first time in 1979 in Maastricht, The Netherlands. They had been given the assignment to establish a new medical school in Ismailia, Egypt, in the Suez Canal zone, and were looking for an educational model that would suit the needs of their prospective students and, in addition, would help them to respond in a more direct and appropriate way to the needs of the health care system in Egypt. Existing medical schools were producing high numbers of graduates (Egypt is among the countries with the highest number of doctors per 10,000 inhabitants) but their impact on the quality of care in the country was limited; Egypt had, for instance, a very high infant mortality rate. Zohair and Esmat were determined to contribute to a change in the country and saw the education of doctors and other health workers as a tool to accomplish this. So, they looked for an instructional approach that could help them accomplish this, and found it in problem-based learning and community-based education. My colleague Peter Bouhuijs and I were asked to help them in establishing their school, marking the beginning of a lifelong collaboration and friendship.

The school became an example of modern medical education for the world. It was, in fact, the first school that combined a student-centered approach with community-based activities. From the beginning of their studies, students were

involved in community-based service in the Suez Canal area. One day a week, they would assist the primary-care physician or the nurses in the community they were assigned to, would engage in health promotion activities, or would undertake some relevant health research. (Students of the school discovered, for instance, that schistosomiasis emerged in the Sinai desert, a region previously free of that endemic and debilitating disease, because snails were transported via a freshwater canal under the Suez Canal.) Since the community-based activities were thematically related to the theory studied in the subsequent days, tutorials could be used for further clarification of problems encountered in practice. The program was hugely successful. It had an immediate impact on the quality of care in the region. The primary-care physicians working in the area were trained to teach the students in the community, leading to instant improvements in the quality of the services. Sometimes the program was too successful, Zohair once told me, showing his characteristic smile: students were expelled from one of the regional hospitals because patients preferred to talk to them rather than to the hospital's specialists; they felt better understood by the students.

A problem plaguing many medical schools in the developing world is poor funding. Most staff cannot survive on the salaries provided by the Ministry of Education, and have to engage in private practice, limiting their availability for teaching. Zohair's solution to this problem was to start a clinic associated with the school. The clinic employed staff of the medical school and was used as an important training site for students as well. This enabled staff to make a decent living while at the same time contributing to the training of students.

During his life, Zohair encountered political problems quite regularly. As a medical student in the Nasser period, he was put in jail because of his left-leaning convictions that did not fit with the prevailing political elite. During his years as Dean of the Faculty of Medicine he had to deal with political attacks from outside as well as inside. During periods of elections of officers within the school (an event of public importance in Egypt) he was in the newspapers accused of being a US pawn, an accomplice of the Israeli Mossad, or a Muslim fundamentalist depending on the political preferences of his opponents. When he tried to introduce in the region a simple system of health insurance, he was accused of being a Marxist who tried to socialize the health care system. Nevertheless, he was not without political influence himself. He knew the political elite of his time and acted as an advisor of the Minister of Education on a regular basis.

Zohair Nooman was invited to be among the founding fathers who met in 1979 in Kingston, Jamaica, to establish The Network of Community-Oriented Educational Institutions for Health Sciences. To his dismay forever that invitation reached him after the meeting was over. Nevertheless, in 1985 he became its Chairman and in 1987 its Secretary-General. As his Associate Secretary-General, I assisted him in transforming The Network from an insignificant band of pioneering schools to an organization of more than 150

institutions dedicated to the renewal of health professions education. The publication in the 1980s of reports by the Association of American Medical Colleges and the World Federation for Medical Education concerning the importance of a student-centered and community-oriented approach to health professions education were seen by us as the direct effect of the appeal of these ideas to a broader audience of educators in the health sciences. The conferences of The Network organized under his leadership attracted more participants every year; a journal was established (*Annals of Community-Oriented Education*, now *Education for Health*); books were published (e.g. Noonan *et al.*, 1990); and Network Publications, a publishing company dedicated to the dissemination of the innovative ideas was established (e.g. Schmidt *et al.*, 2000). After his retirement as Secretary-General he wrote a book in Arabic about the lessons he had learned as an educational innovator. The book turns out to be quite influential in the Arab world. Recently, I saw it used extensively in an international workshop at the faculty of health sciences, King Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Next to management and educational responsibilities, Zohair continued his work as a medical researcher. He has been an internationally acknowledged expert of liver disease, as witnessed by his 20+ articles on the topic which I was able to find through a Medline search. In later years he took an interest in the epidemiology of schistosomiasis (Noonan *et al.*, 2000).

In his educational work, Zohair Noonan displayed an unusual combination of idealism and realism. He understood the dynamics of educational innovation better than most innovators I met. I remember that, right after the first group of students had entered the faculty of medicine of Suez Canal University, Zohair began to discuss the issue of whom within the staff of the school would be able to continue the innovation once he and Esmat would step back. His conclusion was that a younger generation should take over. In order to prepare them for this task, he enrolled 12 of his junior staff in a Master of Medical Education program offered by the Department of Medical Education at the University of Illinois in Chicago, USA. It is members of this group that now, after 20 years, have taken over managerial responsibility at the school and are developing its program further.

Zohair was a humanist, in all senses of the word. He exhibited in his life and work universal human values. He stood for freedom of speech and freedom of thought even if these thoughts did not match prevailing religious or political doctrines. The quest for social justice was a driving force in his life. He always chose the side of the underprivileged, even if this was not a popular position. His caring for ordinary people and their needs and ambitions was crystal clear from everything he did. This attitude was not the result of intellectual process or political expediency, but heartfelt and direct: he simply loved people.

This love for people was also extended to his collaborators. He loved his young “warriors”, who were always ready to fight his struggles with him; both in Ismailia and in Maastricht at the Network Secretariat. He considered them

his sons and daughters, was interested in their personal lives and did everything to help them. As one of these sons, I can only testify that this love was not a one-sided affair. I admired him deeply: the personal choices that he had made, his humanity, his humor, his intellect. I sorely miss his advice and his ability to put difficult choices in the right perspective.

My thoughts are with Esmat, Zohair's lifetime companion in marriage and work, and, like him, a monument of integrity and love for people.

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