

Hashim Al-Witri

The founding father of neurology and medical education in modern Iraq

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“ Nations are always looking ahead for development and prosperity. No doubt, sciences and education are the best wings nations need in order to achieve their targets; however, this does not negate the fact that there is always a huge need for an inspiring force. A force that points them to the right direction through sustained perseverance stands against challenges and difficulties, which are so plentiful in our life. This inspiring force constitutes the illuminating pages of the history of nations. The editorial board has decided to present to its respected readers some of its proudest stories from our modern medical history. First and foremost, to express gratitude and appreciation to our countrymen who strived and persevered to act as pioneers to pave the road for the successive generations in medicine, and secondly to provide those generations with an inspiring role model from our nation to help them enhancing their own success in their endeavours.”

Sir Harry Sinderson Pasha is always mentioned by the members of the Iraqi medical community and Iraqi historians as the founder of the Royal College of Medicine of Iraq. When we want to list Iraqi doctors who shared with him this hard and noble mission, Hashim Al-Witry and Saib Shawkat would certainly featured on the top of the list.¹ The former was the leader and the Sheikh of physicians in Iraq while the latter was the leader and the Sheikh of surgeons in Iraq. This article is going to talk about Professor Hashim Al-Witry and his fascinating role in the history of medicine and medical education in Iraq.

Hashim Al-Witry is one of Iraqi pioneer doctors, the founder of clinical medicine, particularly neurology, and the most influential man in medical education in Iraq in the first half of the last century. (Figure 1)

He was born in Al-Dahanah quarter in Baghdad in 1895^{**} to Arabian parents. He was the offspring of a well-known family in Baghdad; his ancestors were eminent as authors and religious clerks. After completing primary and secondary schools in Baghdad, he joined to the Military School of Medicine in Haider Pasha in Istanbul and graduated in 1335 After Hijra (AH)

* The date of his birth was mentioned differently by different authors, it was stated as 1883, 1898. Look for his Obituary in the BMJ and Lancet, however I had prefer to use 1895 as being stated by his son Professor Saad Al-Witry in a personal meeting with the author.

** According to his certificate of graduation which was in Turkish language

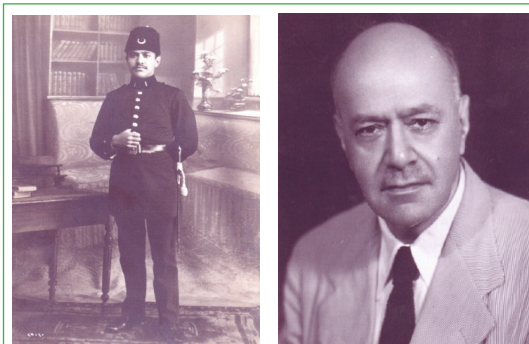


Figure 1: Professor Hashim Al-Witry. Left: during his undergraduate study in Istanbul. Right: Later in his career as a dean for the Royal College of Medicine of Iraq

Courtesy of Professor Saad Al-Witry

about 1918.**²

His early medical career

After graduation he worked, for a while, in Military Hospitals in Istanbul and Konya,³ then he joined the Arabic revolution in 1919 and served as a medical officer (Captain) in the Medical Services of the Arabic army in Syria under the reign of King Faisal Bin Al-Husain. At that time, he was the personal physician of Amir Abdullah who subsequently became King Abdullah of Jordan.²

After the exile of King Faisal from Syria by the French armed forces, he returned to Baghdad in autumn 1920. He worked as a private doctor and he taught health in police schools. Then he was appointed as assistant doctor at the laboratory of the New General Hospital in Baghdad. In 1922 he was appointed as a public

health doctor in the public health directorate till 1925 when he was then transferred to the Royal Hospital (Al-Majidiya) as a practicing doctor in general medicine.^{2,3}

His Role in the Iraqi Medical Society

Since the early years in his medical career he showed an aptitude for organization of medical work in Iraq. He was a founder member of the first Iraqi medical society which had been established in 1920 under the name Baghdadi Medical Society; the name which then changed to Iraqi Medical Society in 1935. Professor Al-Witri was a very active member of the society; and was elected as its secretary in 1926. Thereafter he was elected as president for the first time in 1938, and was re-elected again from 1943 to 1945, and from 1947 to 1954. When the society decided to edit a medical journal, professor Al-Witri was its editor-in-Chief. With his colleagues he published many articles in this journal. At that early time, he showed a great interest in teaching medicine and other sciences in Arabic language.

The society had made a lot of valuable work in the first and second decades of its life like for example raising and supporting the idea of establishing a medical college, forming a committee to discuss the high mortality rate among children in Iraq where professor Al-Witri was one of the members of this committee, and organizing the first Arabic Medical Conference in Baghdad in February 1938.³

The Royal College of Medicine of Iraq

The Royal College of Medicine of Iraq, later called the College of Medicine University of Baghdad, was founded in 1927 (Figure 2). This achievement was possible because of the huge efforts of many; Al-Witri was one of them.⁴ At that time the decision of founding a college of medicine was not an easy job in a country which was striving to exist within an environment of lack of funds, resources and enough educated people; in addition to some impediments imposed by some politicians for various reasons. One should always mention with great gratitude the pivotal role made by King Faisal I who persevered relentlessly in establishing this college.^{5,6}

Because of the shortage of qualified teachers for this newly established college, the government, at that time, had recruited many prom-



Figure 2: The building of the Baghdad College of Medicine, was opened in 1930

inent professors from the UK for being part of the faculty; also it had sent many Iraqi doctors to the UK and other European countries for training in many specialities. Al-Witri was one of those who have been sponsored and sent to the UK to pursue a training course in general medicine and neurology at the National Hospital, Queen Square⁷ in 1928. On returning home in 1929, Al-Witri became the head of the department of clinical medicine. He was responsible for clinical training of the medical students at the hospital wards. These educational responsibilities did not preclude him from offering his patients the medical care they deserved.²

Many of his colleagues and students praised Al-Witri for the ethics, behaviour and medical knowledge he had consistently shown during all periods of his medical career.^{8,9} They described him as being very serious, highly respected, esteemed, kind to his patients and knowledgeable.¹⁰ He was passionate of his profession, eager to increase his knowledge and keen to transfer that knowledge to his students through teaching and publication. Many described him as being the actual symbol to what a professor should look like.¹¹

The dean of the Royal College

In recognition to his scientific career the government had nominated professor Al-Witri as the Dean of The Royal College of Medicine of Iraq in 1937. He was the third Iraqi doctor to hold this post after Hana Khayyat and Ahmed Qadri, and the overall fourth dean if we add Sinderson. He served as a dean of the college for a about 10 years over three periods; the first period was from November 1937 to January 1939. The second was from 1941 to 1942, while the third period was from 1946 to 1952.³

His achievements as a dean

During the time when he was a dean, The

Some Aspects of Al-Witry's Personality

Written by: Professor Saad Al-Witry

“ Professor Hashim Al-Witry was stern but compassionate, firm but just, behind a well-controlled façade, he was full of feelings and emotions that are not betrayed usually. He was thoughtful but reserved. He had a very limited circle of close intimate friends; not very open in exchanges with people around him, sparse in verbalization in ordinary conversation but quite articulate as a lecturer, and then he was precise and clear, able to simplify complex issues for easy comprehension.”

“ He was an avid reader, followed nearly all available publications related to his speciality. Reading and collecting books was particularly

his only interest in the last decades of his life. He spent a good part of his income on buying books: old historic prints and manuscripts, and new ones; building one of the largest personal libraries in the region and expanding the family library that he inherited. It's subjects covered medicine, history, literature, theology, arts and culture, poetry, and science in various languages, being himself multilingual.”

“ Apart from time to time spent doing his official work, and a short time spent in his consulting rooms, Professor Hashim Al-Witry devoted all his rest of the day to reading and writing to the last day of his life.”

Royal College of Medicine of Iraq has witnessed remarkable changes; these are some of his achievements:

1. Increased the capacity of the college by building new lecture rooms, laboratories, and museum in early fifties of last century.³
2. Provision of the college with laboratory equipment and medical devices.
3. Increased the admission number of students accepted to study Medicine.
4. Started a new system for selecting students for medical studies: a system which was totally based on fairness and quality.¹²
5. In 1947 the college started post graduate studies like PhD in medicine, master degree in surgery, and PhD in basic medical sciences.
6. He encouraged scientific research and contributed, in 1949, in the establishment of the institute for medical research.⁷
7. He was keen to raise the standards of medical education in the college. This was made through selection of faculty members and revision of the medical curriculum to be updated and in consistent with the international standards.³
8. He invited many eminent international doctors to present lectures, and participate in the clinical exams.
9. Provided the medical library with periodicals and international journals like Lancet, British Medical Journal and others.¹³

The visit of Lord Moran and Professor Critchley to Baghdad

In accordance to Professor Al-Witry's intention to develop the standards of medical education, his term in the forties and early fifties witnessed unprecedented visits of high calibre international physicians and surgeons to Baghdad. Of those were Lord Moran and Macdonald Critchley (Figure 3). The former was the president of the Royal College of Physicians 1941-1950 and the personal physician of the UK Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill,¹⁴ arrived in Baghdad in 1942. The aim of his visit which was organised by Al-Witry was to assess the scientific standards of the Royal College of Medicine of Iraq. The vis-



Figure 3: Lord Moran President of the Royal College of Physicians (1941-1950) on the right, Macdonald Critchley president of the World Federation of Neurology on the left.

it culminated in a three-year plan during which the Iraqi side should fulfil the requirements in order for the college to be recognized by the Royal College of Physician.¹⁵ The latter name was an outstanding neurologist and the president of the World Federation of Neurology.¹⁶ During his attendance to Baghdad, Professor Critchley participated in the discussions about evaluation and revision of the curriculum of the Royal College of Medicine of Iraq. The wise and judicious thinking of Al-Witry about how to gain the international approval in a short time had enabled hundreds of Iraqi doctors to continue their post graduate study and training in the UK, the step that hugely contributed in building a good health system in Iraq thereafter.

Other Work

1. He was a member of the founding faculty of the Royal College of Medicine of Iraq.²
2. He was the founder of the department of clinical medicine in the college.
3. He had established neurology as a separate entity from psychiatry. Ward number 3 at the Royal Hospital was allocated for neurological diseases. We should mention with great pride that this ward, at that time, had been provided with negative pressure ventilator (Iron lung). That type of ventilator was used for the treatment of poliomyelitis and other acute peripheral polyneuropathy that may affect respiration.² He was truly the founding father of neurology in Iraq.
4. Al-Witry was known for his efforts and beliefs in Arabic language as a language of medicine and science.¹⁷ He translated many medical articles and textbooks into Arabic. Also he was very interested in the History of medicine of Arabs, and the achievements of Arab doctors during the rise of Islam. He and some of his colleagues had shown an interest for searching in history books about how diseases were diagnosed at that time and what were the causes of death of Abbasid Caliphs. His work in these fields were published in medical journals and presented as lectures organised by the Iraqi Medical Society.²
5. He worked with Dr Dawood Al-Chalabi to translate English medical and scientific terms into Arabic. A lot of correspondences about this issue were made with the Arabic language forums in Syria and Egypt.²



Figure 4: Al-Witry the second from the right, Najeeb Al-Yaqoobi the first from the left. We can see Jack Aboodi the first from the right. Those three were the founders of neurosurgery in Iraq.

Courtesy of Professor Saad Al-Witry

6. He was an active, permanent and founding member of the Iraqi scientific Forum.^{2,18}
7. In early fifties, under his help and assistance the speciality of neurosurgery has been established at the Royal Hospital as a separate ward. In addition to Al-Witry, Professor Najeeb Al-Yakubi and Jack Aboodi were the establisher for this speciality in Iraqi (Figure 4).²
8. In early fifties, he endeavoured in establishing of Dar Al-Hikma (House of wisdom) that proposed to include colleges of medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, and chemistry. This was before the creation of Baghdad University and it was probably the core of its existence in 1957.¹⁹

Titles, Awards and Medals:

He became a professor of Medicine in 1932, and Emeritus professor of internal medicine in 1958.⁸ The Royal College of Physicians granted him an honorary FRCP in recognition of his achievements and work during his career in 1949.⁷ Also He was a member of the international society for internal medicine and for many years representative of Iraq.⁸ He was the personal physician of Al-Shareef Husain of Mecca, Amir (later the King) Abdulla of Jordan, and King Faisal I of Iraq. He was awarded medals and decorations from: Shah of Iran, Imam Yahya of Yemen and King Faisal I of Iraq.²

Retirement

In 1952, he stepped down from being dean to work for the establishment of Dar Al-Hikma. He continued his activity as a professor of medicine at the college. On 1st September 1958, he

has retired after years of success and achievements.

Professor Al-Witry had continued to provide medical care to his patients at his private clinic. Also he pursued his interest in reading, writing and translating into Arabic language. He spent a big deal of his time in reading to the degree that his son, Professor Saad Al-Witry, has said that he could not remember his father but with a book in his hands. Professor Hashim Al-Witry advised all doctors from all generations that Medicine is a sacred profession; probably doctors in addition to priests are the only persons that people, in front of them, can talk frankly about all their own sensitive and private matters without reservation so they should always prove that they earn this confidence. He stressed on the fact that doctors will not be able to fly in the medical career without the couplet of ethics and science.²

In January 1961 professor Al-Witry passed away.² Death had put an end to his life but it could never erase the legacy of this great man from the minds of his students not only those who were taught by him directly but also for the new generations who are so eager to be inspired from his biography. This is the biography of a man whom being praised by Sinderson Pasha in a speech during his departure of Iraq at the end of his service in 1946 when he said that the relief for him while he was departing Baghdad was his confidence that his successor (meant Al-Witry), as a dean of the college, was like him or even better.²⁰

Publication and editorial work

It may be a daunting task to quantify all scientific work of professor Al-Witry during his career; however these are some of his achievements in this field:

1. Editor-in-chief of the Journal of Baghdad Medical Society later Iraqi medical society.
2. He was the founder and Editor-in-chief of the scientific Journal of the Royal College of Medicine of Iraq, published for the first time in 1935. It was a bimonthly Journal published in Arabic and English.²
3. He published many articles in the fields of medicine, neurology and medical education.
4. He translated into Arabic language many medical articles and textbooks.



Figure 5: Few of Iraqi pioneer doctors in 1920, Al-Witri is the first from the right.

5. In cooperation with Mu'amar Al-Shabender he wrote a book named (The History of Medicine in Iraq) published in 1939. This book was very precious as it included a historical research about medicine in Iraq from the Abbasid era till the year of the publication. Also it had invaluable data about the establishment of Baghdad College of Medicine and its impact on health services in Iraq at that time.
6. In 1944 he published a booklet (Health Services in Iraqi) which included very important data and some health biostatistics relevant to the first half of the twentieth century.
7. He published a book entitled (Classification of rheumatic diseases).

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Also I have to present my thanks to **Professor Walid Al-Wali** who has read the draft of this article and made very valuable linguistic amendments.

Note for the readers:

When I dared to write in the medical history I thought it would be much easier than writing a scientific medical article, but this expectation seems to be illusions. It is actually very difficult because the resources are very few, difficult to be found, and is most of the time they have a contradictory data. So I invite you all to write to the journal your notes and correction and we will be happy to publish your comments in the next issues.