



OBITUARY

Late Brig. Dr. Saeeda Akhtar, SI(M)

In the history of Pakistan's Women Doctors, Late Brig. Dr. Saeeda Akhtar was the first woman doctor of Pakistan Armed Forces, was the first woman doctor to be promoted to the rank of Brigadier and the first woman of Pakistan to be awarded the Sitara-e- Imtiaz.

Brig Saeeda Akhtar was born at Amritsar (now in India) on the 16th of Dec. 1926. She did her matriculation from the prestigious Girls English High School, Amritsar, passed her F.Sc from Lahore College for Woman, Lahore and later MBBS from King Edward Medical College, Lahore in 1948, with high academic awards. Thereafter she did her house job. Her entry into the medical college along with some other women, in fact paved the way for Muslim women of the sub continent to attain higher education before partition. While still a medical student she volunteered for services in refugee camps of Lahore. She was also one of the small group of doctors, who pioneered the establishment of the Fatima Jinnah Medical College, Lahore in 1948. In 1949, she joined the Pakistan Army as a civilian doctor for the reason that women were not granted a commission, at that time. After the new policy came into effect she received a permanent commission in 1952. Out of the two women doctors, she was the senior one to complete Grading in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, in 1957 and in due course, she became a Classified Specialist in 1969. During her tenure of service, she was posted to 14 stations, whereby she had the unique opportunity of working in all the major hospitals of Pakistan Army. Moreover she was the only woman doctor of Pakistan to have served in the active areas in both wars with India, i.e. at Sialkot (active zone) in 1965 and at Lahore (active zone) in 1971. Furthermore she was the first woman doctor in the history of Pakistan Army to have been considered as a test case for promotion beyond the rank of a Major to a Lieutenant Colonel in 1971, a full colonel in 1975 and a Brigadier in 1979, after the honorable award of Sitara-e- Imtiaz for her highly meritorious services as the first woman of Pakistan to have received this high award in 1978. She in fact was recommended by the Army Medical Directorate for further promotion to the rank of Major General, but on account of the policy at that time of not promoting women to that rank, she did not get it. Her outstanding performance as an officer and her professional competence, had opened the path for the promotion of other women doctors of Pakistan Army Medical Corps (AMC). During her entire service career, she commanded the utmost respect of her juniors, colleagues and supervisors and fulfilled all her task assignments with extra ordinary zeal, spirit, dedication, forbearance and selfless devotion,

most ethically, through the days and nights. According to one of her junior officers, now a retired Major General, "at finding some officer at fault, she would call the person to her office, observed contemplative silence for a while (during which the officer shuddered) and then wore a most pleasant and meaningful smile in an unbelievably composed manner, which was enough for the concerned officer, to learn the lesson for life". She was a soft spoken person and was known to have shown no favouritism to anyone, what so ever, for instance in the OPD she would not entertain a doctor patient before other patients, who came in first. On the whole she was extremely kind, considerate and helpful, with deep empathy and respect for her patients. She had excellent communication skill and clinical acumen, infact an inspiration for junior doctors to follow her as a perfect role model. After such lofty heights and distinguished service, she retired from the AMC in 1986 as a contented officer. Thereafter she served as a consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist for 15 years, before leading a retired life at Lahore.

At the home front she dealt with the adversities encountered, in a still more brave and composed manner. She not only brought up her own children single handed, but also looked after her sisters and brothers in a most amicable manners. She instilled pleasantness, confidence and ability in her children but all wrapped in humanity, so much so that her upright son Lt. General Azhar Rashid is today the surgeon General/DGMS (IS) of Pakistan Army, apart from being a humane cardiac surgeon, who requested his great mother to adorn him with this rank, which gave a world of satisfaction to Brig. Saeeda Akhtar and what an honour for the lucky son. **Alas!** On the 7th of February 2012, the great lady passed away, but after having left a Legacy behind, for all Pakistani women doctors to emulate.

According to her illustrious son "She lived with dignity and went with dignity". May her departed soul rest in peace and tranquility in the Heavens above. On Wednesday the 8th of February 2012, at the meeting of the society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Pakistan (SOGP) (Rawalpindi-Islamabad chapter) Fateh-a-Khwani was held and one minute silence was observed on behalf of SOGP, in respect of Brig. Saeeda Akhtar's dear memory. At a visit to the son and his family, for condolence, amazing calm, cultured, groomed and sophisticated behavior was encountered, as though the family had admirably accepted the final will of Allah! Yet prayers are a must for their continued consolation to keep bearing such a tremendous loss.

Prof. Khalida Adeeb Khanum Akhtar.