

Tribute

A Tribute to Dr Ruth Pfau

The death of Dr Ruth Pfau [9.8.2017] has deprived Pakistan of a most devoted and dedicated medical practitioner who devoted her life to the eradication of the dread disease of leprosy that is the scourge of under-developed countries. She had been an indefatigable worker in her battle against leprosy ever since she arrived in Pakistan in 1960, when the country was in a state of backwardness especially in the field of medicine. There were lepers in plenty and leprosy was rife but there was no programme directed towards its elimination backed up with ample funds, a team of capable doctors and paramedics, or drugs manufactured or imported to combat its lethal effects. Seeing the backwardness of the country in its approach to this terrible disease, Dr Pfau decided to devote her life to the struggle against leprosy in Pakistan.

Despite the overwhelming odds against her, Dr Pfau did not allow any obstacle to deter her progress be it lack of funds, an indifferent public, or official bureaucracy. She was able to obtain the services of dedicated doctors from Germany [her native country] and elsewhere who possessed a missionary spirit, directed towards the elimination of human suffering through removing disease and also obtain drug supplies from countries that had totally wiped out leprosy in their areas. She worked hard to obtain physical and other facilities for the treatment of patients especially in outlying areas. The Marie Adelaide Leprosy Centre (MALC) in Saddar, Karachi, is the headquarters of a nation-wide network directed towards the treatment, control and removal of leprosy along with the rehabilitation of leprosy patients into a society that expresses disgust and loathing at their suffering. All these facilities are provided free of cost to the patients themselves and the Centre is funded by private donations, foreign contributions and governmental support, the last of which has been insufficient in relation to the number of patients. The amazing achievement of Dr Pfau is that she and her team brought the disease under control before the date of its elimination arrived as given by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The great success of Dr. Pfau shows that, in the face of hard work and dedication, no task is impossible, no obstacle insurmountable, and no goal unachievable. Of course a total focus, a sense of direction and a generosity of soul and body is also a pre-requisite to its attainment. Dr Pfau did not only give medicine or diagnosis, but she poured her human feelings of love into her patients making them survive the most traumatic disease of all, and made them feel that they were worthy citizens of a society that may have initially spurned them. Love is the most potent medicine of all and Dr Pfau was generous with it as with all her efforts. She kept track of her patients, male and female, who lived in distant villages and mountains away from medical care and supplied all their medical and human needs –even working to send tents, food and medicines to flood-affected destitute persons ignored by society and the government. Her work won her laurels on the international and local levels, and she poured all her rewards into the great cause she was serving. The Centre has extended its umbrella of medical care to patients of blindness, diabetes and physical impairment. There are regular programs for the training of technicians and paramedics and technical staff, as well as the visits paid by students and young persons from Europe who would like to spend time in the assistance of the patients. Dr Pfau became a one-person demolition machine to destroy the dangerous and deleterious effects of this disease from Pakistan. Her staff was energized by her tireless efforts and they worked hard in this major task. Her associates, Sister Vargas, Sister Jeanine and other persons from as far away as Mexico became a team of ‘administering angels’ always at the service of the sufferers. Her Pakistani staff, such as Dr Mutahir Zia [who penned her biography reviewed by the present writer in *Pakistan Perspectives*, July-December 2013], were readied for the great responsibility of taking over from her as her age advanced and her health declined but her spirit was as eager and active to carry on her tasks.

Dr Pfau led a Spartan life-style, living in a small 6’x8’ room which had few basic items of furniture. She was always available to patients — living in a simple, humble and spiritual way. She gave herself no rest and relentlessly pushed herself to the utmost limits of physical and mental endurance. Even when on a ventilator in her last illness, she insisted that the ventilator be given to other patients in need. Such was her utter self-abnegation!

I have been proud of my association with the MALC for over 25 years and I have tried to develop a sense of social responsibility among my many students to assist in this most noble task – the alleviation of human suffering. Yes, Dr Pfau! You were a beacon-light for this nation and its most deprived sections and you performed your God-appointed

task with total commitment. Your superlative goodness and kindness will remain imperishable memories for ever in the hearts of the millions you treated and those fortunate to have been associated with you.

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