

Chapter-29

How to write an Obituary Note?

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Pakistan has produced numerous medical personalities who have contributed a great deal to improve patient care, medical education, promoted research culture and accomplished a lot in community service. These were the real role models which have become a very rare commodity these days. The new younger generation of medical profession is also not fully aware of their contributions and how they worked under those very difficult circumstances when Pakistan was created in 1947. Once on a suggestion of a very dear friend, well-wisher and a renowned physician, I decided to undertake some research to record the contributions of these distinguished medical personalities. Unfortunately some of them had died by then and only a few were still alive. However, I realized that compiling such a book was a very uphill task. It took me about ten years before I was able to compile, edit and publish that book “ Medical Men and Women of Pakistan”.¹ That was the first time that even I came to know about these distinguished medical personalities. While compiling this book, what was more frustrating for me was the lack of interest shown even by their own family members including children who had no time to spare to talk to me.

We all praise people as long as they are alive and once they leave this world, we all tend to forget about them. It is very rare that one sees some good well researched obituary notes when some distinguished healthcare professional leaves this world simply because no one has even thought about it seriously

while another reason is that they do not know how to write an obituary note and do justice to the departed soul. It is extremely important that we highlight the achievements and accomplishments of these distinguished medical personalities not only to pay tributes to them, recognize their valuable contributions but also to encourage others to follow in their footsteps. If the society starts appreciating such people, it will definitely encourage the younger generation of healthcare professionals to take some lessons from their seniors. Ideally the society should honour these people during their life time but if that is not done, at least recognize and commend their contributions at condolence meetings, References and paying tributes in obituary notes.

Who can write an obituary note?

Ideally it is some family member or professional colleague who knows them well, have worked with them are in a much better position to recall and record their contributions in an obituary note. However, some professional writers can also be asked to accomplish this task provided they are provided the much needed information by the family members of the deceased and their professional colleagues who can share the much useful information with the writers.

Example:

Suppose you wish to write an obituary note about a distinguished healthcare professional who has served as a medical teacher, head of an institution before his death. Following are some of the points which you need to take care and include in the obituary note:

1. Brief information about the family background.
2. Actual dates of birth and death.
3. Early education, professional education.
4. Professional life, his accomplishments and achievements.
5. Some details about his family life must also be added.
6. Talking to the family members, professional colleagues will be extremely helpful.

7. If you can get hold of a detailed CV which gives personal, family details and details about their professional career, it will be extremely useful and helpful.
8. Do include information about honours, awards, by professional specialty organizations, institutions if any.
9. Some details about the children particularly so if any one of them have also joined the medical profession should be added.
10. Contributions to medical literature, details about scientific papers published in national and international biomedical journals if any should be mentioned.
11. Include details about the number of postgraduates he or she has trained.
12. Give details of Books if he or she has authored.
13. Highlight any special achievement, service to the community.
14. Cause of death, disease history if any.

Cultural and Religious issues:

There are certain religious and cultural issues which are also involved while writing such an obituary note. We in the Muslim World usually believe that once someone has died, we should not talk about their weaknesses and failures. It does carry some weight but from ethical point of view, such an approach is not considered good. Any obituary note which fails to mention any failures, weaknesses of the deceased will not give the complete picture. To err is human and we are all human beings, hence we all have our weaknesses. While writing an obituary note, one should not forget to mention these failures or weaknesses but what one can do is to do it in a way which does not offend the family members but at the same time it should also be based on facts and not heresy.

During the last one year I had to write obituary notes on a couple of distinguished medical personalities who left this world. They were very dear friends and included late Dr. Maqbool Jafary an eminent physician who was also my mentor, Dr. Ali

Muhammad Chaudhry the renowned cardiologist and former Editor of Pakistan Heart Journal who also served as President of Pakistan Cardiac Society, Prof. M. Sultan Farooqui the former President of College of Physicians & Surgeons Pakistan, late Prof. Moinuddin a noted hematologist and late Prof. Tahir Saeed Haroon former Professor and Head of the Department of Dermatology at King Edward Medical College, Mayo Hospital Lahore.² I tried my best to highlight the different facets of the personality of late Dr. Maqbool Jafary,³ when writing about late Dr. Ali Muhammad Chaudhry while on one hand, it gave details of his professional skills and competence, it also highlighted the professional jealousy, intrigues which forced him to resign from teaching job from Liaquat Medical College Jamshoro, Hyderabad. Later on an enquiry absolved him of all the charges and Dr. M.H. Toosy the then West Pakistan Health Secretary wrote to the Governor of West Pakistan Malik Ameer Mohammad Khan of Kalabagh to reinstate him. However, before he could sign it, he was called to Islamabad by President Mohammad Ayub Khan and asked to resign. Hence, this also deprived the country of an eminent competent medical teacher who could not be reinstated. This was confirmed to me by Dr. M.H. Toosy himself. This episode was also included in the obituary note to put the record straight.⁴

Prof. M. Sultan Farooqui's obituary note appreciated his administrative skills, his contributions to develop and expand College of Physicians & Surgeons of Pakistan, setting up various Regional Centers and further cementing the relationship with different Royal Colleges of UK something which was started by his predecessors. However, at the same time, this obituary note did mention his failures as well. He not only lost elections to be a councilor of CPSP, an institution he run and managed for many years as an undisputed leader but it also resulted in complete rout of his entire group in the council elections. The reasons for his downfall were also incorporated.⁵

Late Prof. Moinuddin was a well-known hematologist who remained associated with Baqai Medical University for a very long time, also served as Principal of Baqai Medical College,

trained a large number of postgraduates who did M. Phil, MD and PhD, contributed greatly to medical literature and also authorized quite a few booklets on hematology. Not only that he helped establish Baqai Institute of Hematology which after his death was renamed as Moinuddin Institute of Hematology by Baqai Medical University in recognition of his services. All this was covered and highlighted in this obituary note.⁶

The above are just a few examples of how to write an obituary note which can be followed by some modification keeping in view the personality and their interests.

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