

# Dr. Edma Abouchdid, 1909-1992

## The First Arab Woman to Graduate from the Medical School of the American University of Beirut

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Edma Abouchdid was only fifteen when, in 1923, she decided to pursue a medical career. The principal of the American School for Girls (ASG), an American woman from the Presbyterian Mission was astounded for since the foundation of that school in 1834, no graduate had ever aspired for higher education, let alone in a co-educational field. No young woman was expected to challenge society's deep rooted traditions of seclusion for women. At the time it was a bold step for parents to send their daughters to High School in the first place. After graduation, she was supposed to stay at home, and wait for the appropriate and arranged suitor.

The American principal's reaction was clear. She pointed out to Edma that A.U.B. (The American University of Beirut) is flooded with young men from all over the Arab world. According to Edma she said "How are you going to manage in such a situation? Go home, and stay with your parents until the suitable husband comes!" Instead Edma went home to argue her case. After intensive deliberation she succeeded in convincing and securing the support of her father.

But new difficulties awaited her at the university's Registrar's office. The A.U.B. had just started to admit girls that same year. However,

although Edma passed the entrance exams, the Dean said that the A.U.B. cannot accept an only girl in a class full of boys. She had to find a female companion! As she had none in mind, the Dean suggested recruiting a foreign candidate from the United States. One month later, Edma went with the Dean to welcome her colleague at the Beirut sea-port. You can imagine their disappointment when they were told that the expected student decided to stay in Palestine to marry someone she had met on the ship. This time Edma convinced the Dean to trust her abilities to cope and compete and was finally accepted to pursue her studies, in a class of seventy boys.

In 1926, Edma was the only girl to graduate with a B.A. degree from the A.U.B. In 1931, she was the only girl among seventeen students to graduate from the Medical School. Her graduation caused a big stir in the community, and the Abouchdid household. Reporters followed her for interviews, and the local papers spoke of her with awe and praised her as the first female to make such a significant step and achievement.

Edma spent the next two years in Paris and London specializing in Gynecology and Pediatrics. In 1934, she came back to the A.U.B. to teach at the Medical School, and work at the out-patient clinic of Pediatrics. In

1936, she accepted an invitation from Iraq to be a councilor at the Royal Medical College, and a lecturer at the Training School for Girls in Baghdad. She also established a private clinic at her home where she received women and children patients from all social classes.

In 1946, after ten years of service in Iraq, she decided to go to the U.S.A. for further studies and specialization. She joined the John Hopkins University at Baltimore, where she specialized in Gynecology and Obstetrics. Her training, for two years, was done under the supervision of world known specialists like Richard Taland, Emile Novak, and Georgina Simmer-Jones. In her third year she was introduced to recent techniques for dealing with sterility and endocrinology. She stayed a few months in each of the Mayo Clinic, the Philadelphia Hospital and the Presbyterian Center of New York.

The following twenty five years proved to be a period of remarkable achievements and rewarding experiences. In 1948, she became Assistant Professor of Gynecology and Obstetrics at the Medical School of A.U.B. and was promoted to Associate Professor a few years later. Along with teaching, she devoted time to her private clinic. Her patients came from all over the Arab

world, and she was called on to deliver and treat the women in the Royal families of the region. She became an authority figure in dealing with sterility and could even convince husbands to submit to medical tests, a thing men denied and used to shun away previously. She was honored with decorations from the Lebanese government, the Kingdom of Jordan, the Lebanese University Women Association and the Greek Orthodox Church.

Driven by a strong commitment to social service she became involved in many associations, particularly those that promoted women's freedom and welfare. She was one of the founders and the first President of the Lebanese University Women's Association. She was a member of the Lebanese Medical Association, a Board member of Beirut University College and the International Association of Fertility.

Through her efforts, the Family Planning Association was founded in 1969. She was its first President until 1975, when succeeded by one of her prominent students, Dr. Adnan Mroueh. Her goal for promoting this organization was to liberate women from having unwanted children, to improve the economical status of the family, and to introduce proper contraceptive methods. She established a chain of free clinics all over the country, where parents could seek help and advice. To establish this end she had to lead a public campaign to inform the establishment and the public alike. She contacted ministers, high officials, the press and news media on all levels and succeeded in getting the moral support of the authorities. However, she was unable to get any changes in the legislation.

Edma actually retired in 1985. She



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sold her clinic in Beirut and moved to live with her brother Richard, in a neighboring suburb. On the evening of October 11, 1992 she suffered a heart failure, and passed away in the ambulance on her way to the hospital. It was rather discouraging that few people went to pay their respects to this great great woman at her funeral, for only a few friends and relatives attended it.

Nevertheless, the noteworthy achievements of this exceptional woman impressed the world and notably the International Biographical Centers of the West. In April 24, 1992, the Board of the Center of Cambridge informed her of her nomination as the International Woman of the Year. On May 15, 1992 the Director General told her that she was selected, among very few others, to be featured in the twelfth

Edition of the "World Who's Who of Women." In June 1992, she was informed that her name was to be included in a list of the "first five hundred" to appear in a new Edition of the Center. In June of the same year, the American Biographical Center invited her to become a life member. In July 1992, she was informed of an award. "An Honor that will never be awarded again. "You are one-in-a-million. A medal will be awarded to a strictly limited number of distinguished biographers, like yourself", the letter said •

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