



OBSERVATIONS

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Saleyha Ahsan: Trust me, I'm an activist



[Image: Duncan Smith]

Biography

Saleyha Ahsan is a doctor working in the accident and emergency department at Ysbyty Gwynedd Hospital in Bangor. Born in Essex, she trained at Sandhurst and served in the British army in Bosnia, rising to the rank of captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps. Inspired by the work of doctors in conflict zones, she left the army in 2000 and trained as a doctor in Dundee while developing yet another career presenting television documentaries for the BBC and Channel 4. These include *Trust Me, I'm a Doctor*, as well as many reports from frontline trouble spots such as Syria, Libya, and Kashmir.

What was your earliest ambition?

To be an independent activist against injustice. This came from listening to my father's strong opinions against inequality and from being allowed to stay up to watch the *Ten O'Clock News*. And from my mother, whose advice remains, "Stand on your own two feet."

What was your best career move?

Gaining a place at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst for officer training. In 1997, as a captain, I stood in a field hospital watching my soldiers and doctors manage a Bosnian patient with a traumatic amputation after stepping on a booby trap explosive device placed in his home by Serb neighbours. I was

a non-clinical medical support officer with the Royal Army Medical Corps on an operational tour of the Balkans with the NATO stabilisation force. At that moment I decided to retrain as a doctor: three months later I applied for medical school. Never looked back.

What was the worst mistake in your career?

It's more a regret that I haven't got my graduate diploma in law yet—I can't afford the fees. As soon as finances allow I'll do it. I love the law, and it's relevant in my humanitarian medical work.

How is your work-life balance?

Er . . . it's a work-work-work balance: emergency medicine, humanitarian work, and media. I'm one of those folk whose work is life.

How do you keep fit and healthy?

Jogging and yoga. Part of the reason I joined the army was because I loved the idea of a job where you had to go for a 7 am run.

What single change would you like to see made to the NHS?

A unified, logical IT system that works between hospitals and trusts. If you want to centralise services, shouldn't the system follow patients around? How many hours are lost trying to retrieve notes, information, plans? And I'd like to see the NHS no longer used as a political football: its responsibility should lie with a cross party, informed, experienced committee with relevant experience in the sector.

What do you wish that you had known when you were younger?

Not everyone's on your side, so stand up for yourself.

Do doctors get paid enough?

I say this having worked in other sectors and knowing their pay scales. I compare those roles with my responsibilities as an emergency medicine middle grade in the NHS, in charge on a night shift when the department including resus is full and ambulances are lined up. In my last London job I took home

just over £2000 a month, couldn't afford a mortgage, and lived in one room in a shared flat—so, does that sound like enough? I'm certainly not doing the job for the money. Nurses are appallingly paid, and cutting bursaries was cruel.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

To my parents: my aim of being financially secure so that I could look after them comfortably in retirement was sacrificed for my medical career, when I turned down more lucrative opportunities. That's taken a toll on personal family ambitions.

What do you usually wear to work?

Scrubs—blue ones, green ones; and, when feeling dressy, black ones with a pink trim!

Which living doctor do you most admire, and why?

So many. Pauline Cutting—I heard her report from Palestinian refugee camps under siege in Lebanon during the 1980s, and a seed was sown about medicine and humanitarianism. And my sister, Saima Ahsan—a paediatric registrar in training who's worked her socks off. Observing her shift patterns, early starts, late finishes, and how she was often left to get on with managing sick kids in overstretched and understaffed hospitals and not giving up, was inspiring. She picked up very severe viral meningitis and was in hospital for a month, complete with two lumbar punctures, when left largely alone to care for babies with meningitis. That's dedication.

What is the worst job you have done?

Classified advertising in a pharmaceutical journal. I resigned to supervise rock climbing in Canada for three months.

What single unheralded change has made the most difference in your field in your lifetime?

Non-invasive ventilation. After rapid assessment and consent a mask is placed on the face, and then you watch a patient with deteriorating breathing come back from the brink of peri-arrest. That terrified look in a patient's eyes, replaced with one of just the most immense relief, is incredibly rewarding.

What new technology or development are you most looking forward to?

I most look forward to the end of Jeremy Hunt's hands on the NHS and this government's strangulation of it.

What book should every doctor read?

Children of the Siege by Pauline Cutting.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

Solo cinema trips.

Where are or when were you happiest?

The battle for Bani Walid on the Libyan frontline, camera in hand. Going in to film the end of a bitter battle and following the medics as they greeted friends and colleagues with relief that they were still alive and intact.

What television programmes do you like?

Question Time, *Newsnight*, and *Unreported World*.

What personal ambition do you still have?

To be an integral part of the fight to save the NHS, involving political engagement. We all must share that ambition. I've worked in places where lives are lost daily for the want of decent, free at the point of care service. As doctors, we fight for the very lives of our patients when we fight for the NHS.

Summarise your personality in three words

Angry, impatient, curious.

What is your pet hate?

My "big" hate is bullying—sadly, it exists in the NHS. I don't tolerate unfair treatment of colleagues, juniors, or other staff members, in any form.

What would be on the menu for your last supper?

My dad's lamb biryani,

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like mourners at your funeral to hear?

"Into the West" by Annie Lennox, as I'm an official Tolkien geek. The lyrics describe life and death as a journey, and I believe that. And *The Road Not Taken* [poem by Robert Frost], as I've always taken the road less travelled.

Is the thought of retirement a dream or a nightmare?

There'll be no retirement—just more writing time.

If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?

My career is such that I've done exactly what my ambitions were. But the next move will be back to Scotland: my spiritual home and where I became a doctor.