

In memoriam: Mr Jimmy James (1940–2019). His contribution to the training of surgeons in Malawi and the College of Surgeons of East Central and Southern Africa (COSECSA) region

Wakisa Mulwafu

John “Jimmy” James MB ChB FRCS Ed passed on the 4th December 2019, the day we had our COSECSA annual general meeting in Kampala, Uganda. He died after a short battle with metastatic prostate cancer.

He studied at Kingswood School, Bath, a missionary school and later St Andrews University where he graduated in 1966. He took his FRCS Edinburgh in 1972. He later moved to Ethiopia, where he was working as a consultant in reconstructive surgery in leprosy with All Africa Leprosy Tuberculosis and Rehabilitation Centre (ALERT). This was in 1973-74 and in 1977 to 1981. He also had the same role with (and, incidentally, pilot) with African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) and the flying doctors’ service in Nairobi, which he described the best job in the world. He made visits to hospitals in Moshi, Tanzania. He returned to the UK during his children’s education and was working as a consultant in plastic and reconstructive surgery in Shotley Bridge and Sunderland for 14 years.

In 1996 he retired from the National Health Service (NHS) and worked in Malawi running the Burns Unit at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital (QECH). The story of the Burns unit in Blantyre started with a Stagecoach bus accident and many victims of the accident had burns. They were bundled together with other patients in the surgical wards. That is when the founder of Stagecoach bus companies, Anne Cloag, decided to fund the Burns Unit. Anne was a former plastic surgery trained nurse who had subsequently established a highly successful business. She saw the first hand problem of burn injuries in Malawi, and treated by the general surgeons, based at the QECH. There were a high number of burns admissions to the hospital. Funding for the project was sought from ‘Stagecoach’, which had recently become established in Malawi. In September 1993, the recently completed 32-bedded Burns Unit in the QECH, Blantyre, Malawi, was officially opened and Jimmy James as Plastic Surgeon for the newly opened Burns Unit.

He was later employed by the College of Medicine, Blantyre, Malawi teaching Surgery both to undergraduate and postgraduate students. He was appointed to the unit in 1996 as Senior Lecturer in the Department of Surgery with responsibility for Plastic Surgery and Burns. This greatly enhanced the ability of the unit to meet the increasing demands placed upon it as well as facilitating research and development and improved patient care. He also served as the Deputy Head and Associate Professor of Surgery. His first trainee in Plastic Surgery was Dr Devor Kumiponjera

and he had this to say about Mr Jimmy James

“He was easy to talk to and very generous. But very strict and tough when it came to education”

Dr Kumiponjera was one of the very first four postgraduate trainees in the department of Surgery and the others were Dr Mandela Thyoka, Dr Kondwani Chalulu and the late Dr Lovemore Munthali. Jimmy was a smart and committed teacher. He taught during our undergraduate surgery rotation and below are some of his famous quotes

“You will judge a good plastic surgeon by his ability to repair the palm of the hand”

“A good surgeon can perform in Malawi any operation that he can do in the UK. The only difference may be the length of the incision”

In 1999 he was elected by the officials of the Association of Surgeons of East Africa (ASEA) to be Secretary General with the remit to set up a training college for surgeons; he believed passionately that surgeons should be able to train, and qualify, in the region. He moved to Arusha to run the newly-formed College of Surgeons of East, Central and Southern Africa (COSECSA) where he trained and examined medical graduates in Surgery. A generation of surgeons in the region were trained or examined by Jimmy.

He was an overseas country representative of COSECSA for a number of years and he represented the College very well as evidenced by the increasing number of overseas Fellows of the College. Jimmy was a beloved husband of Judith and father of Emma, William and Michael.

COSECSA and the College of Medicine in Malawi have lost one of the most prominent pioneers of Surgery in the region. The remains of Jimmy were laid to rest at Gask Parish Church in Perthshire on 13th of December 2019.

References

<https://obituarykenya.co.ke/professor-john-jimmy-james/>

Stevenson JH, Borgstein E, Van Hasselt E, Falconer I. The establishment of a burns unit in a developing country—a collaborative venture in Malawi. *British journal of plastic surgery*. 1999 Sep 1;52(6):488-94.

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Mr Jimmy James is seated second from our left