

Profile Interview: Thengo Kavinya talks to Dr Yamikani Chimalizeni on his career

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Academic Journey

I did my secondary school education at Mwanza Secondary school then went to Chancellor College where I spent 2 years before joining the College of Medicine, University to study medicine. After eighteen months of internship at Queen Elizabeth Central hospital, I went to Mua Mission hospital where I worked as a principal medical officer for eighteen months. Then I joined Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Research programme as a medical officer, at the same time I started training as a paediatrician in the department of Paediatrics and Child Health. As part of my paediatric training, I went to the University of KwaZulu Natal for 2 years. Before going to Durban, I had changed employment and joined the department of Paediatrics and Child Health as an assistant Lecturer. Having completed my paediatric training in 2011, I became a lecturer and over the years, have gone up the ranks to become an Associate Professor of Cardiology and Paediatrics.

Any personal aspects that have helped to shape the person you are today?

I am hardworking. When I really want something, I work hard for it. At the same time, I am flexible and easy going. My parents always encouraged us to be God fearing and to work hard in what we do. And I have been fortunate over the years to be surrounded by amazing mentors like Late Prof Malcolm Molyneux, Prof Terrie Taylor and Prof Elizabeth Molyneux. The list is endless, but all these senior colleagues and mentors have had an influence and have shaped me to be the person I am today.

What led you to develop interest in the field you are in now?

I have always wanted to become a medical doctor since I was in secondary school. Probably, I just fancied the title, and I admired the white coat and the stethoscope. After medical school, there were two things I knew I was going to end up doing. Firstly, was public health and secondly paediatrics and child health. Public health became more unlikely because I didn't see myself leaving the bedside. When I joined the paediatric training, because my work also involved working in the paediatric research ward as a medical officer, I got exposed to clinical research and I have always enjoyed combining my clinical work with research.

When I went to Durban for my paediatric attachment, I enjoyed my paediatric cardiology block therefore when an opportunity arose to subspecialize, I grabbed it and went to University of Pretoria at Steve Biko Academic hospital to become a paediatric cardiologist. Upon my return from the paediatric subspecialty training, I have continued participating in clinical research in the paediatric research ward.

What does your work entail and how would you describe it in the Malawi hospital setting?

As a paediatric cardiologist, my work largely entails managing children who are admitted with cardiac problems. In the paediatric department, we have set up a special ward where only patients with cardiac problems are admitted. This was done to improve outcomes in children with cardiac problems. I also conduct outpatient clinics every Monday and Tuesday. As previously mentioned, I have been working in the paediatric research ward for over 15 years therefore I continue to conduct clinical research there which includes provision of clinical care to study participants. These are sick patients with severe malaria or non-malaria coma. Because the hospital isn't a specialist hospital, I also provide general paediatric care especially when I am on call duty.

What are your areas of particular clinical interest?

I am a paediatric cardiologist therefore my interest is mainly paediatric cardiology. Paediatric Cardiology has two aspects, either congenital heart diseases or acquired heart diseases. I have interest in rheumatic heart disease where there is a potential to improve outcomes in children with RHD by raising awareness in the community and among health workers, thereby result in early diagnosis and provision of secondary prevention of recurrent acute rheumatic fever episodes which has been proven to be one of the effective ways to control the disease.

As I mentioned earlier, my other interest is clinical research. We are currently investigating an adjunctive therapy for cerebral malaria.

What do you see as the greatest need currently facing the Malawian Paediatric Hospital Setting?

There are a lot of things that are lacking in our hospitals, and it is difficult to mention the greatest need. However, in my opinion, the greatest need is human resource. There are a lot of sick children in our hospitals therefore, the few clinicians and nurses available work long hours with few resources to manage these patients. This causes burn out. There is therefore need to improve the number of people working in the hospitals.

What's the most challenging/rewarding about what you do?

The most challenging or frustrating thing about what I do is not being able to provide all the care I was trained to do. When I see a child with a cardiac problem, and I know what can be done for the child to have a good outcome and yet I cannot provide that care just because of lack of resources is frustrating and disappointing. Having said that, it is quite rewarding when I see a child coming to hospital very sick and after treatment, seeing them walk back home laughing and playing. Amazing thing about children is that they don't lie, it is either they are well or they are sick.

What are your dreams/goals for the future?

My dream is to have a cardiac centre especially a Catheterization laboratory. This will provide me and the upcoming cardiologists with the opportunity to put into practice the skills and knowledge we trained for. This will go a long way to improving the management of children with cardiac diseases. A cardiac centre would hopefully go along with cardiothoracic surgical services as well.

What advise would you give someone considering your career?

If you want something, sacrifice everything for it. It is in fact fulfilling if what you are doing is what wanted to do because despite the frustrations, you still enjoy the work. Becoming paediatric cardiologist requires hard work and combining with clinical research even calls for more hard work, focus and patience. I can assure those that are interested in cardiology that it is an amazing field and very interesting.

What else would you like people to know about what you do?

I am one of twelve children. I am married to Akuzike and we have two daughters Tiyamike and Tamanda. I am a devout Catholic.

Outside hospital, hobbies and things you are passionate about

I like football. I am a Manchester united and Nyasa Big Bullets supporter. I love listening to gospel music.