Inspirational Women in Surgery: Ms. Sindiswa Ntloko, Vascular Surgeon, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Dr Sindiswa Ntloko, an inspiration for women surgeons in Africa

Ms Sindiswa Ntloko was born in Pietermaritzburg (PMB), South Africa, and lived between Rietvlei with her great-grandmother and Edendale (PMB) with her grandmother and mother. Her early schooling years would start in one school and finish in another between the two provinces. During her high school years, two younger sisters were born. In her female-only household, she had strong role models. Her inspiration to pursue medicine came from her grandmother who was a nurse. She studied at Nelson R Mandela School of Clinical Medicine (UKZN), graduating MBChB, following with internship and community service. She was intrigued by general surgery when her 4th-year

tutor, Mr. Anderson, provided a logical approach to a clinical scenario. She carried this inspiration throughout medical school and internship (in Edendale) cemented her interest in surgery. During her registrar (resident) training, her interest in vascular surgery peaked during the 4-month rotation. She credits watching the specialists, particularly Mr. Raj, a renowned Durban vascular surgeon, carefully performing arterial anastomoses, bringing her to the realization that this specialty required discipline and skills. She undertook subspecialist vascular training and was the first UKZN black female (and only the second in South Africa overall) to qualify with the Cert Vascular Surgery (SA).

As a surgeon practicing in KwaZulu-Natal with only one public vascular center in the 94000 sq. km province, she has a clear passion for “saving limbs”. She calls this a slogan that she brings to many rural communities in which there are still missed diagnoses and delays in patient presentation, often due to persistent cultural beliefs that keep patients from seeking medical attention. She aims to salvage limbs as much as possible and avoid amputation, which has often been the go-to procedure for many community patients. The concept of mentorship has been her biggest challenge. As a female who a self-confessed introvert, she often struggled to ask for assistance particularly in an environment where “you don’t easily fit in and constantly have to prove yourself.” She realized that trainees truly benefit from having a person who can be a dedicated mentor, thus paving the way for other female registrars. With this in mind, Ms. Ntloko tries to foster an encouraging and supportive environment, building confidence and skills in her mentees.

Another challenge she faced was obtaining the subspecialty exams. She was humbled by her initial failed attempts, but credits her faith, her supportive family, and her unwavering determination to achieve her goal for her

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ultimate success. When describing her contributions to the discipline thus far she feels she has much to offer, but feels that, as yet, has achieved only a little of her aspirations.

She related that the pandemic has challenged the global community, as individuals, as healthcare providers, and as surgeons. Acquiring practical and novel technical skills for surgeons in resource constrained environments can be a challenge, given lack of easily accessible simulators or skills laboratories. However, adapting to the “new normal” technological advances have afforded her the opportunity to interact with international peers. She quotes Ellen Johnson Sirleaf “If your dreams do not scare you, they aren’t big enough.” She describes herself as not “an

articulate person,” and with her quiet demeanor, she often does not get recognized as a doctor, let alone a surgeon. However, she acknowledges that one’s internal drive is ultimately what determines the outcome. For her, being a surgeon is an amazing privilege; one must remember to respect the process, the patients, and one’s teachers, and pay it forward by being in turn, a compassionate teacher and mentor to registrars and trainees.

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