



Inspirational Women in Surgery: Dr. Jane Fualal Odubu, Uganda

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Dr. Jane Fualal Odubu was born and raised in the West Nile region of Uganda, north of Nebbi District, the current Zombo district, a region bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Dr. Fualal's mother, the late Ms. Bertha Cenge, was one of 10 siblings living in Mahagi district in the DRC. Ms. Bertha only studied up to primary 6, whereas the rest of her siblings did not go to school at all. Dr Fualal's father, the late Mr. Michael Bipenjonga Odubu, was one of 4 siblings: two boys and two girls. He joined the police force and climbed through the ranks

pretty fast because of his dedication, hard work and qualifications. He had 9 children with his wife, making a dozen (12) children. Dr. Fualal's parents worked to educate all their children. Other than the two who have deceased, all have followed professional paths.

Dr. Fualal is a mother of many besides her 3 beautiful children; a son Dr Edwin and 2 daughters Tracy and MaryAnne who are still in medical school. She has single-handedly raised her 3 children after their father passed away in 2004. Dr Fualal has travelled with all of her three children to each College of Surgeons of East Central and Southern Africa (COSECSA) conference and they have become a fond part of the surgical fraternity.

After completing medical school at Makerere University, she completed three years of service in rural northern Uganda before enrolling in the post-graduate Masters of Medicine (Surgery) program at Makerere University/Mulago Hospital, from 1993 to 1996. She then served as Medical Officer Special Grade at Mulago Hospital (1996–2002) before serving as a Consultant Surgeon (2002–2012) and a Senior Consultant Surgeon (2012–present). She has completed numerous post graduate clinical, leadership and management trainings from a range of institutions.

She is the current Head of the Breast and Endocrine Surgery Unit Mulago National Referral Hospital and an Honorary Senior Lecturer Makerere University College of Health Sciences. She pioneered the Endocrine specialty in Uganda in October 2002 and established this unit linking it to then already established Breast unit to become the Breast and Endocrine unit of Mulago National Referral and Teaching Hospital. The development of this unit has been critical in advancing multidisciplinary breast cancer care in the country

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and women's health. In addition, she has pioneered national and regional advances in endocrine surgery as the country's pre-eminent thyroid surgeon and has amassed an extensive series of complex pheochromocytomas managed successfully through complex coordination with the medical and anesthesia teams. She has performed over 20,000 major surgeries in her 26-year work experience with outstanding outcomes.

In addition to her decades of service to the public health care sector in Uganda. Dr. Fualal has been a tireless advocate and champion educator for generations of Ugandan medical students, post-graduates, and junior faculty. Even in the country's busiest clinics, with long waiting lists, you will find her with a crowd of students sharing essential physical exam pearls. In the operating room nothing gives her greater joy than nurturing the holistic growth of the post-graduate residents and refining their technical skills. She personally ensures all graduates can safely perform a thyroidectomy.

She has broken many barriers for women surgeons nationally and in the region. She served as the first female president of the Association of Surgeons of Uganda (ASOU) and now is the first female President Elect of COSECSA and the first female COSECSA President. She is the Patron of Women in Surgery WiSA Africa.

She has also served in numerous other leadership roles. Dr. Fualal is currently the Chairperson of the Uganda Medical Board and the International Students' coordinator, Department of Surgery, College of Health Sciences, a very busy office that receives hundreds of medical students from around the world who come to learn from surgical care in Uganda. She has also spearheaded multiple department collaborations in endocrine and breast surgery.

She is very involved in the African Medical Research and Education Foundation (AMREF)/Ministry of Health Specialist Outreach for thyroid surgery. In this role, for decades she has provided outreach thyroid surgery to remote areas.

His Excellence Yoweri Kaguta Tibuhaburwa Museveni the President of the Republic of Uganda awarded Dr. Fualal for her outstanding medical/Surgical work with "The Independence Medal" in 2016, and she has received many other honors.

She reflects, "All my achievements were not without challenges. I am forever grateful for the training I received at Lacor Hospital and my firm faith. Doubt from male doctors affirmed my determination to be a surgeon. When I started post-graduate studies, I was put alone on all my rotations while the men were paired. It was hard work. It was during this period that I had my two babies, and even had obstetric complications. A number of fingers pointed at

...*'this unserious lady'...How could she do that. I moved on with the inborn strength of a woman!*".

"Another blow was the loss of the father of my then three children, the youngest being 3.5 years old at the time. I thought it was the end of my career as a surgeon. I sat down and re-evaluated my life. I cut down plans for any intense academics, resorted to short courses and brief observerships, got more involved with the children's education and travelled with them on my trips wherever and whenever possible. I put them in schools easily reachable owing to my hectic life in the hospital and operating theatre. Being now the sole bread winner, I worked extra hard to get money for their tuition, feeding, and I built the homes we live in. I held the hoe, made bricks, drew house plans and supervised the construction site; yet, remained focused while planning and doing my surgeries. I could not publish so much, as time and concentration were the rarest commodity in my life. However, I managed to present scientific papers in many surgical meetings. I remained a happy woman and a happy mother as I saw my children succeed in their studies. Many misunderstood and misinterpreted my hard work but I moved on against the tide with the energy of a lioness." She has the nickname; *'the lion of Zombo'*, by her children.

Outside her routine Dr. Fualal is a passionate flower and tree gardener. There are countless numbers and species of orchids (and other plants) lying on mosses, tree trunks, barks and soil decorating her entire house and compound. In addition, she is an animal farmer with a herd of cattle, goat, pigs, poultry and rabbits. She has not let her voice rest either; she sings in the choir at St. Joseph's Catholic Chaplaincy; a practice she saw her late Dad do at St. Jude's church Nagulu.

From where does she draw all this enormous energy and enthusiasm? Dr. Fualal says she loved her father dearly and the two were workaholic friends. Just like her dad, she can work from morning until late without complaining. She reflects, "My mother taught me handcraft and gardening. I think I learnt loving nature from her. She was gentle and loving. I was also inspired by the doctors and surgeons who trained me. They were smart, eloquent, knowledgeable and proud. I wanted to be like them. In my internship, the great doctors like Lucille Teasdale, Pierro Corti, Ezati Isaac, Mathew Lukwiya were role models. When I moved to Arua, Dr Bruno Turri made me love surgery. Arua Regional Hospital was such an orderly hospital that gave me opportunity to practice professionally. Many surgeons then mentored me into what I am today; Prof. A.M Odonga, Prof. I.Kakande, Prof. S. Kijjambu, Mr. Okumu Achandere, Mr. A.M.Gakwaya to name a few. I am indebted to the surgeons who held my hands and

administration of Mulago National Referral and Teaching Hospital who allowed me to pursue my dreams.”

Her advice for young surgeons: “Believe in yourself, do what you know and love best. Follow, love and develop your passion. Perfect your skills as it is what will uplift you professionally and socially. My disposition made me the leader I am as I love to make others do what I do and even do it better than me. Finally, God is our ultimate strength. I

can only conclude by saying the “FEAR of the LORD is the beginning of WISDOM.” I believe in the providence and protection of our living and loving God. He answers our prayers at the appropriate moments of our lives.”

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