A Formidable Female Surgeon: The Journey of Dr. Fualal Jane Odubu

A Tribute to Dr. Jane Odubu: Surgeon, Mentor, Pioneer, Educator and leader in Surgery.

Introduction

Dr. Fualal Jane Odubu's life is a powerful story of resilience, service, and leadership in a field historically dominated by men. Born in Kampala, Uganda, at Mulago Hospital, she is the fifth of twelve children in a humble, loving Alur family from Zombo district. Her upbringing in large household fostered early values of discipline, teamwork, and perseverance, qualities that would define her remarkable career in surgery.

Early Life and Family Influence

Raised by principled and devoted parents, Jane's childhood was a blend of structure and creativity. Her father, Michael Bipenjonga Odubu, a disciplined Senior Police Officer, emphasized integrity and service, while her mother, Bertha Cenge Odubu, was a nurturing homemaker with a flair for crafts and storytelling. These contrasting yet complementary role models left an indelible imprint on her character.

Despite financial hardships, her parents prioritized education. The family maintained strong ties to their ancestral roots in Zombo, where cultural values and community life enriched Jane's sense of identity. Her early curiosity and love for learning shaped by her parents' examples, ignited her ambition to pursue a meaningful and impactful career.

Education and Determination

Jane's academic path began in Kampala, moving through schools like Police Children Primary School, St. Joseph's Nsambya, and Nyapea Girls' School. Her stellar performance there prepared her for secondary school at Sacred Heart Secondary School, Gulu, where she embraced discipline and leadership.

Facing the challenge of limited science teachers, she transitioned to Caltec Academy Makerere, facilitated by Rev. Fr. Tiboni. Although late for term start, her emotional appeal to the principal secured her admission to the coveted Physics, Chemistry, and Biology combination. Her determination and diligence earned her a place at Makerere University Medical School, the only one in Uganda at the time.

Medical school was rigorous, but she thrived, trekking long distances daily while juggling intense studies and clinical rotations. This period deepened her commitment to medicine, not just as a career, but as a calling rooted in empathy and service.



Dr. Jane Fualal Odubu

Launching a Surgical Career

Her internship at St. Mary's Hospital Lacor in Gulu exposed her to real-life clinical pressures and built her confidence. Under mentors like Dr. Lucille Corti and Dr. Matthew Lukwiya, she learned the essence of patient-centered care. As a Medical Officer at Arua Regional Referral Hospital, Jane honed her surgical skills, successfully operating on her first patient a three-week-old baby with a strangulated hernia.

Initially aspiring to become an obstetrician, Jane found her true calling in surgery, thanks to supervisors like Dr. Bruno Turri and Dr. John Omagino. She went on to pursue a Master of Medicine in Surgery at Makerere, joining a cohort of five and as the only woman. During these years, she managed the dual roles of trainee surgeon and mother to two toddlers, even navigating severe pre-eclampsia during pregnancy.

Trailblazers and Mentorship

Inspired by icons like Dr. Speciosa Wandera Kazibwe and Dr. Olivia Kobusingye, Jane saw a reflection of her potential. Despite surgery being male-dominated, she drew strength from these role models and the solid foundation instilled by her parents.

Mentors such as Prof. Alexander Mwa Odonga and Prof. Ignatius Kakande emphasized professionalism and humane care in surgery. Their teachings shaped



Dr. Jane Fualal hosted the President of Uganda at the 2019 COSECSA Graduation in Kampala

Jane's own mentorship style and her belief in cultivating self-esteem among female surgeons.

Family: Her Pillar of Strength

Jane's journey has always been anchored in her family. The death of her husband two decades ago left her to raise three children alone, a responsibility she embraced with strength and devotion. Today, her children Edwin, Tracy, and Mary Anne have continued the legacy of service and healing, a source of deep pride for her.

Kyatoko village in Rukungiri, their family home, symbolizes both heritage and hope, a quiet palace for rest and reflection.

A Lifelong Career at Mulago Hospital

Jane's professional home for three decades has been Mulago National Referral Hospital. She rose through the ranks from Red Firm to Green Firm, eventually becoming the first female head of what is now the Breast and Endocrine Surgery Unit. As a clinician, teacher, and examiner, she has mentored generations of surgeons.

Teaching has been her passion. Whether in lecture halls, clinics, or operating rooms, Jane emphasized not just technical skill but compassion, communication, and critical thinking. She believes medical education must be holistic, blending theory and humanity.

Pioneering the Endocrine Surgery Unit

In 2002, Dr. Fualal established Uganda's first Endocrine Surgery Unit. With support from leaders like Mr. Antony Gakwaya and international mentors Prof. John Adieng Adwok and Prof. Goran Akerstrom, the unit gradually gained recognition.

Major cases included thyroid disorders, prevalent due to iodine deficiency and complex surgeries on the adrenal and parathyroid glands. Jane spearheaded outreach camps with AMREF and the Ministry of Health in remote districts like Nebbi, Kapchorwa and Kisoro, ensuring access to specialized care in underserved communities. Operating under local anesthesia due to limited resources, she innovated and improvised to deliver quality care and train others on the job.

Surgical Innovation and Teamwork

Among the unit's notable achievements was the routine management of pheochromocytomas, a rare adrenal tumor once considered daunting. By building a multidisciplinary team, Jane helped make these surgeries safer and more successful. She also gained international exposure, observing parathyroid surgeries in New York, and applied this knowledge to local contexts.

Her experiences with rare conditions like insulinomas and neuroendocrine tumors underscored her commitment to continual learning and specialized surgical care.

Leadership and Advocacy

Jane's impact extended beyond the operating room. She took on leadership roles, including Treasurer of the Uganda Medical Association in West Nile and President of the Association of Surgeons of Uganda in 2003, the first woman to do so.

In 2023, she became the first female President



Dr. Fualal as a young surgeon

of the College of Surgeons of East, Central, and Southern Africa (COSECSA), promoting collaboration, education, and surgical excellence across the region.

As Patron of Women in Surgery Africa (WiSA), she champions mentorship, research, and empowerment for women surgeons—still vastly underrepresented. Her leadership has opened doors for many young female doctors who now walk the path she helped pave.

Facing and Overcoming Challenges

Jane's journey wasn't without obstacles. Unequal access to specialized surgical care in rural areas and the persistent brain drain of talent presented significant challenges. But she responded with solutions: training programs, outreach efforts, and consistent mentorship aimed at retaining talent and expanding access.

She firmly believes Africa can become a hub for super-specialized care, reducing dependence on foreign treatment and strengthening local capacity. Her efforts have laid a foundation for this vision to become reality.

Philosophy and Reflections

Dr. Fualal believes in the power of teaching to surpass oneself, not for ego, but for legacy. Her goal has always been to raise surgeons who are better, kinder, and more innovative than her. She also advocates for balance: recognizing the risk of burnout, she stresses self-care through faith, hobbies, and nature.

She encourages African professionals to travel and learn, not to flee but to return equipped to contribute. Knowledge gained abroad, she says, should be brought home to build systems, educate others, and lead transformation from within.

To her, success is not measured in accolades but in the people uplifted along the way. "Lift others as you climb," she says a mantra she's lived out with every student, patient, and colleague she's mentored.

A Life of Service and Legacy

Though she may not have pursued ground breaking research, Jane has been a formidable clinician, an influential teacher, and a visionary leader. Her life's work has touched countless lives from urban hospitals to remote villages.

As she approaches retirement, she finds fulfillment in watching her mentees lead, innovate, and thrive. Her road has been long and filled with challenges, but also triumphs, growth, and deep purpose. She encourages others to embrace their journey, knowing that every challenge is a chance to rise.

Conclusion

Dr. Fualal Jane Odubu's life is a testament to courage, resilience, and unwavering service. She has walked a pioneering path in Ugandan surgery, breaking barriers and building bridges for others to cross. Her legacy is not just in procedures performed or titles held, but in lives transformed through care, mentorship, and vision.

To future doctors, leaders, and dreamers, she offers this final wisdom: "Be bold, be innovative, be compassionate and above all, remain true to yourself and your purpose."