

THE MEDICAL FIELD: HOW FEMALE HEALTH WORKERS HAVE CHANGED THE FACE OF THE INDUSTRY

Arise Reporter

Women have always been healers. As mothers and grandmothers, women have always nursed the sick in their homes. As midwives, women have always cared for people in their communities. Yet, when medicine became established as a formal profession globally, women were shut out.

However, they didn't seat back and look on, but rather waged a long battle to gain access to medical education and hospital training. Since then, women have overcome prejudices and discrimination to create and broaden opportunities within the profession. Gradually, they have been able to carve out successful careers in every aspect of medicine.

This article highlights the significant contributions that women have made to the health care system in Uganda by narrating stories of female doctors who work tirelessly, every day, to improve the country's health sector with tremendous dedication, vigor, and passion.



**Dr Phionah Atuhebwe
Mubangizi**

Regional Technical
Advisor for the World
Health Organisation
in Africa and Asia on
vaccines and innovations

At the World Health Organisation Africa regional office, Dr Atuhebwe heads the vaccines programme in Africa. The vaccines include the HPV, oral cholera, typhoid, malaria, Ebola, polio, influenza, pneumonia and the rotavirus vaccines.

Atuhebwe is a member of several global and regional technical advisory groups that make global policies in reproductive health and immunisation. She holds a master's degree in international public health from the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom and has received extensive executive training in project management and leadership.

After graduating as a medical doctor in 2007, Atuhebwe worked with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Ottawa, Canada. She later returned to Africa to work as a Senior Health Systems Advisor with Ipas Africa Alliance, before joining the World Health Organisation.

To young girls, Atuhebwe has this advice: "Stay true to thyself and work hard. Nothing comes easy. Identify people you wish to be like and find out how they got there. Your inner circle affects your career; get the right people in your inner circle."



Dr Sabrina Kitaka
Senior Paediatrician

Dr Sabrina Kitaka is a senior lecturer at the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Makerere University College of Health Sciences. She was a Gilead Fellow and researcher at the Infectious Diseases Institute from 2003 to 2011, where she undertook a fellowship in paediatric infectious diseases.

She is currently a PhD candidate at the school of Biomedical Sciences, University of Antwerp, Belgium. Her PhD study is on the growth, development and psychosocial adaptation of prenatally infected adolescents in resource-limited settings.

Dr Kitaka provides advisory services on policy and programme implementation for children and adolescents both locally and internationally. She is involved in conducting basic research on various paediatric infectious diseases and offers clinical care to HIV-infected children and adolescents.

She directs the Adolescent Health Training Programmes at the Makerere University College of Health Sciences and is the Founding President of the Society of Adolescent Health in Uganda. Kitaka is also a member of the African Paediatrics Society of Infectious Diseases.



Dr Diana Atwine
Permanent Secretary,
Ministry of Health

Dr Atwine is a clinician and a researcher. She is the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Health and former head of the Health Monitoring Unit at State House. For the last 20 years, Dr Atwine has been a physician for the first family.

Perhaps Atwine’s public profile rose while she was at the Health Monitoring Unit. The unit recovered medicines that had been stolen worth billions of shillings, investigated and prosecuted several workers with corrupt tendencies in the health sector. “To date, people still call me to arrest suspected corrupt individuals, an indicator of the impact the unit made. I take pride in founding the unit that made a modest contribution to fighting corruption in this country,” she says.

At the Ministry of Health, Atwine introduced regular performance management reviews and biometric systems in a number of health facilities, which has helped fight absenteeism by health workers at their stations of duty.

Under Atwine’s leadership, the Ministry of Health has regained confidence from key strategic partners. For example, the Global

Fund has renewed its commitment to fund health programmes in the country after the financial scandal that hit the ministry. “At the time I joined the ministry I found a huge backlog of cases. Some partners had stopped giving us money because of lack of accountability.” The situation is now improving. “We do not babysit people who are not accountable. I get emotional when I get to a hospital and find patients not receiving adequate care. I would give anything for my patients,” she says. Atwine’s philosophy is that there should be value and value for money in everything that is done.

Atwine studied human medicine at Mbarara University of Science and Technology before doing her master’s at Makerere University. She then studied project planning and management at the Uganda Management Institute and clinical research at John Hopkins University.

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Dr Victoria Nakibuuka
Nsambya Hospital

Dr Victoria Nakibuuka is a renowned paediatrician and neonatologist and the Breast Milk Bank at Nsambya Hospital, one of the revolutionary medical undertakings in the country, is her brainchild.

Nakibuuka, whose mother is a retired nurse, completed her Master's in paediatrics in 2007 and worked for five years at Nsambya Hospital before

enrolling for another master's degree in neonatology at the University of Cape Town, South Africa and later returning to the hospital.

She has greatly contributed towards reducing deaths among newborn and premature babies. She recalls that at the time she joined the hospital, about 10 per cent of newborn babies died, which number has since reduced to about 4 per cent. With her effort, the hospital has also reduced preterm deaths from 25 per cent to 6 per cent.

"I hate seeing babies die," says the mother of three. "When I went for my master's in neonatology, I had an option of choosing between doing a PhD and clinical work. I chose the latter. I have worked on thousands of patients and seeing them live after our intervention fills me with pride and happiness. I don't regret

the decision," Nakibuuka says.

Early in her career, Nakibuuka did internship at Rubaga Hospital, from where she was posted to a remote medical centre in Nkokonjeru. She was 24. "The health facility had a high neonatal death rate and the wards were disorganised. I reorganised the ward and made sure babies had their own section. I also trained nurses to give specialised care to babies. As a result of these initiatives, death rates reduced and people in the community nicknamed me 'Musaawo wa baana'."

The daughter of a retired nurse has since become one of the renowned paediatricians in the country. She attributes her achievement to teamwork, a supportive hospital administration and prayer.



Ashar Cheptoris
Dental Surgeon

Ashar Cheptoris is probably the only female dental surgeon from the Kapchorwa sub-region. She is the proprietor of Sinai Dental Clinic in Kampala with a clientele base as far as Tanzania, Eritrea, South Sudan and Rwanda.

Cheptoris attended Nabisunsa Girls' School and Gayaza High School, from where she enrolled at Makerere University for a degree in dental surgery. After completing her course, Cheptoris refused to look for a job and opted to create employment for herself and six other professionals. "All my eleven classmates went abroad for greener pastures, but I chose to stay and serve my country," she says. At 1:200,000, Uganda's dentist-to-patient ratio is worrying, the reason Cheptoris says she decided to stay in the country.

Every year, she partners with dentists from America for outreach in the remote parts of the country such as Bwindi, Soroti and Kumi. "We take all the equipment from the clinic and camp in those places for a week," she says.

Cheptoris describes the situation around the country as miserable. In a single health camp, they can treat over 3,000 children and adults. She also does charity activities in Kenya and Rwanda.

Her inspiration is her late mother-in-law. "If I am granted two hours with anyone who ever lived, I would have loved to meet my late mother-in-law. She was a secretary and a single mum, who raised two doctors and a director. I would ask her how she did it and what made her tick. On the other hand," she adds, "if I were asked to come back to life as somebody else, it would definitely be myself. The only difference is, I wish at age 20 I knew what I know now."

