

A Deeper Look..... looking into the lives of people and projects that are making a difference in Malawi.....

“I feel proud when a patient I am treating for cancer is responding well.....” Dr Leo Masamba, Malawi's only Oncologist gives an interview to Thengo Kavinya



According to www.theoncologist.info an oncologist is a physician who is expert in diagnosing and treating diseases related to tumours or lumps. An oncologist deals with the cause, prevention diagnosis, biology and treatment of cancerous diseases. Cancer develops when the cells of a particular organ behaves in a different manner thereby destroying the healthy cells. Chances of surviving cancer in Malawi are low given that that the Malawi as nation has no radiotherapy machine and only one trained cancer specialist. Dr Leo Masamba is the only specialist in Malawi, he explains.

“I started my fellowship program in clinical/radiation oncology after working as a Medical Officer in several departments and as a junior registrar in the surgical department. Specialisation felt attractive as it open up opportunities for me to assist individuals beyond general medicine.”

On his views of the current status health care in the country Dr Masamba pointed out that a very powerful thing is that a good percentage of health practitioners are genuinely interested in patients well being on top of upgrading their medical skills. “I feel patients receive maximum attention in our hospitals and I feel there is a need for doctors to diversify in different areas of specialisation if our medical care is to improve,” he explains.

Dr Masamba added that lack of equipment is one of the major challenges in his career. “Oncology being a new field in Malawi has few or no structures at all ranging from physical infrastructure, equipment for instance radiotherapy equipment and comprehensive cancer programs,” he said.

Masamba revealed that as the only Oncologist he has a busy day from Monday to Friday. “My day starts around 8 am and finishes at 8 p.m. It involves seeing new patients, treating patients, monitoring their treatment plus addressing their side effects, ward rounds and listening to patients. I also

teach medical students and also meet trainee doctors and this is usually in the evenings.

On his views on the current medical training in the country Leo had a suggestion that it could be wise if basic science at pre medical level could be learned for two years instead of one and that internship should be extended to two years with similar emphasis and include anaesthesia.

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He further encourages students to pursue a career in Epidemiology because it is both rewarding in that it enables an individual to use both critical and analytical skills and opens opportunities to design studies which will bring out something new all the time. “It’s not routine work as in a bank or an accounts office, so it’s very suitable for people who are critically thinking to find something new and this in itself is interesting.”

Masamba points out that the completion of his medical training was one of his career highlights and also if a patient he is treating is responding well as his joyful moments, “I feel proud or should I say joyful when any of the patients am treating is responding well and overcoming his disease.”

He concluded by saying that cancer needs more input if the cases are to drop, “Cancer is a very serious problem and has not been fully uncovered. We still have many cancer cases which have not been diagnosed and many of these have been mistaken for Tuberculosis or Malaria. I hope government hospitals will strengthen their capacity to prevent, screen, diagnose early treat and supply palliative care effectively. The Oncologist revealed that globally, cancer has killed more people than tuberculosis, HIV/Aids and malaria combined, pointing out that the situation could be worse in Malawi.

Dr Masamba is in his early thirties and did his primary school at Mthumba Model School and joined Mzimu woyera seminary in Chikhwawa but did his Forms three and four at Bvumbve Private Secondary schools. He comes from Chikhambi village T/A Kasisi.