

Meet Tanzania's soon-to-be first developmentalist

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The future of Africa lies with our children. Yet a child born here is 14 times more likely to die before the age of five than if they had been born in a developed country. Africa's children need doctors. But with less than five physicians per 100,000 children (compared to 50 in Europe) the manpower just isn't there. That is why the work of the African Paediatric Fellowship Programme (the APFP) is so important.

The hope of saving a child's life and securing a real future for that child planted a seed to pursue a medical career in paediatric medicine for Dr Aleya Remtulla.

Tanzanian-born Dr Aleya says, as early as grade 9, she knew she wanted to specialise in paediatric care and had done all she could to achieve her dream. She is currently completing her first year of training in Developmental Paediatrics at UCT (Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital) and is sponsored by the African Paediatric Fellowship Programme (APFP). **Since 2008, the APFP has trained 163 specialist and sub-specialist pediatricians and allied health workers.** [The Children's Hospital Trust](#) has committed to raising R9m for the next cycle of this programme.



Dr Aleya Remtulla

The programme gives doctors across the continent a chance to build advanced skill sets in paediatric care. "I knew I wanted to help children, manage their care, and help them survive and thrive. I wanted to give them the best chance at attaining a good quality of life and thereby create a stronger generation for the future," she says.

While she may have soldiered on pursuing her dream career, Dr Aleya shares that it was not easy.

Her most tasking years were during her master's degree at the Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences (MUHAS) in Dar es Salaam. She says the three years of educational training were enthusiastically challenging. However, with the support of her mentors she managed to hold on to her dream.

"Those years were the most rewarding yet difficult three years of my life. It was an uphill battle, but there were several rewarding moments of saving a life," she smiles.

However, her experiences as a practising paediatrician made her realise a greater need in her country. The need for awareness, improved diagnosis and management of neurodevelopmental disorders. "The introduction to autism was very brief during my three-year master's studies. We only had one session. And that was sufficient to get the ball rolling.

"I started thinking; I have seen many patients, and perhaps I may have underdiagnosed a few. I didn't realise that developmental disorders could co-exist with other medical conditions," she says.

In Tanzania, neurodevelopmental disorders are still viewed as a fallacy. Parents often attribute it to witchcraft and seek traditional or religious assistance/guidance. Dr Aleya says her country has yet to set a system or path for developmental disorders. Only this year, after years of lobbying, children with neurodevelopmental disorders are counted as part of the country's census.

Upon completing her training, Dr Aleya will be the first developmentalist in her country. She looks forward to returning home

and establishing a system, building a team, creating policies and training her colleagues in the holistic care of patients with neurodevelopmental disorders.

While expressing her experience thus far in the program, she explained, “The approach here is motivational. We learn based on the patients we attend/see. It helps us realise our strengths and gives us varied clinical exposure. We treat the child holistically, including aiding the family with support.

“We get to see the difference our interventions have made, what needs to be changed or tweaked to get the most out of our patients,” she says.

Dr Aleya is currently doing her research and clinical services at RCWMCH. At the end of her training next year, her research will be evaluated by a committee of researchers and professors at UCT. She will then require to write exams set by the SA College of Medicine and produce a portfolio of her work showcasing her range of skills. Programme Manager for the APFP Helen Meintjes says, “The APFP fellows carry an enormous load. When they get to their home countries, they need to create a system and advocate for care.”

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