

# Profile Interview: Thengo Kavinya talks to Dr. Yohane Gadama, Neurologist on his career



*"I want to contribute to building a robust neurology service in Malawi. This involves improving clinical care, fostering meaningful research and collaborations, and enhancing neurology education"*

## Tell me about your academic journey

As a clinician and lifelong learner, my academic journey has been shaped by curiosity, determination, and the desire to make a meaningful impact. My academic journey has taken me across different districts in Malawi and beyond its borders, shaping my adaptability and resilience. While many assume that I have always been in Blantyre, my early years were quite the opposite. I started primary school at Nsalula Primary school in Salima before moving to Kamuzu Primary in Mchinji, where I completed Standards 3 to 5. My niece always laughs at me that I skipped kindergarten/nursery school. Later, my family relocated to Blantyre, and I finished my primary education at Bangwe Catholic Primary School, earning a place at Bangwe Day Secondary School, also known as Green Malata. As such, I proudly consider myself a true Bangwe citizen.

At Bangwe Day Secondary school, I enjoyed excelled grades and exposure to different leadership roles. One of my proudest moments was becoming the first student from the school to be admitted to Kamuzu University of Health Sciences (KUHeS, formerly College of Medicine, University of Malawi). I graduated as a medical doctor in 2016 and completed my internship at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital (QECH). I briefly worked with Malaria Alert Centre and Malawi-Liverpool-Wellcome Trust (MLW) before earning a Commonwealth Scholarship to pursue a Master of Science in Stroke Medicine at the University College London (UCL). Initially, I aspired to specialize in neurology in the UK, but after two months abroad, I realized I wanted to be closer to home and build a career in Africa. This led me to enrol in neurology specialist training at Stellenbosch University/Tygerberg Hospital, Cape Town, South Africa in 2020. I completed my neurology training in June 2024, officially becoming a neurologist. Currently one of the only 2 adult neurologists in the country. My academic journey has been made possible thanks to the financial support of Medic To Medic, Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, Mandela Rhodes and Beit Trust scholarships. From Salima to Bangwe, Mahatma Gadhhi CoM campus, to Queen Square London and Cape Town, and back home—this has been my journey in a nutshell.

## What personal aspects have shaped who you are today?

I grew up in a humble home where financial struggles were a daily reality, but so was the warmth of togetherness and communal living. As the second-born of five children, I quickly learned responsibility—helping with household chores, assisting my younger siblings, and selling small food items to support the family. In our close-knit community, we looked out for one another, and I came to appreciate both the strength of self-reliance and the humility of seeking

help when needed. Growing up in a religious family also reinforced these values, teaching me discipline and grounding me in virtues that kept me focused, even when faced with distractions. These early experiences shaped my resilience, work ethic, and deep respect for collective support—qualities that continue to guide me today.

## What led you to develop an interest in Neurology?

When I finished secondary school, I was torn between studying economics or medicine. I presented the dilemma to my mother who didn't hesitate but pick medicine. I think she made a best decision for me. When I was pursuing my undergraduate degree, there were no qualified neurologists practicing in Malawi. Patients who needed a neurologist were managed by internal medicine physicians and sometimes the gap in their care were just apparent. I remember one particular incident when a young man came into the hospital with first onset seizures and behaviour change. The medication he was given was ineffective, and I realized that what she truly needed was a neurologist—someone with the expertise to properly diagnose and treat her condition. He probably had an autoimmune encephalitis, but no one thought about it then. That moment sparked my deep interest in understanding the brain, the spinal cord, and the intricate workings of the nervous system.

Shortly after I graduated, I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Joseph Kamtchum Tatuene, a Cameroonian neurologist who was in Malawi for his research interests and seeing patients for free. I jumped at the opportunity to work closely with him and learn from his expertise. This experience solidified my passion for neurology and I am grateful for his support and mentorship.

Neurology presents some of the most challenging and intellectually stimulating cases in Medicine and I enjoy the prospect of using my brain to understand the disorders of the brain. The critical shortage of neurologists in Malawi and around the region made it easier for me to sell my aspirations and love for neurology to funders to support my dream.

## What does your work entail as a Neurologist, and How would you describe it in the Malawian hospital setting?

At my core, I am a doctor first. Most people know me as such, and my work predominantly revolves around treating patients. As a neurologist, I am specialized in treating the following broad range of conditions;

Stroke and neurovascular disorders, epilepsy and seizure disorders, neuroinfections, neuromuscular disorders, movement disorders, headache disorders, neuropathic pain, neuropsychiatric disorders, functional neurological disorders, neurodegenerative disorders, sleep disorders and spinal cord pathologies.

Teaching is a fundamental aspect of my work. I am employed by KUHeS as a lecturer in the Department of Internal Medicine. My primary role is to train medical students and

postgraduate trainees, with a significant portion of my teaching conducted at the bedside in the hospital setting.

However, due to the overwhelming burden of neurological disorders and the limited number of neurologists in Malawi, I find myself doing much more clinical work than my job description entails. My day typically begins with a morning handover meeting, which I use as an opportunity to discuss cases with peers and teach. I then attend to patients in the wards and handle numerous consultations from doctors within QECH and from across the country. In addition, I dedicate a day each week to private practice, providing services to patients who can access private healthcare. Beyond clinical and teaching responsibilities, I am involved in research and spend time focusing on building and expanding neurology services in the country.

### **What's the most challenging and rewarding aspect of What you do?**

I choose to thrive in the positives. The most rewarding aspect of my work is seeing how listening, examining, and explaining a diagnosis to a patient can be transformative. Many neurological disorders are complex and disabling, so simply providing clarity can bring relief. I also take great joy in teaching and mentoring trainees. Seeing them grasp and appreciate the beauty of neurology is fulfilling, as I know I am shaping the future of the field.

However, challenges are plenty. Neurology in Malawi is under-resourced, and diagnostic and treatment options are limited. Many essential medications are unavailable, leaving us helpless in cases where interventions could significantly improve patient outcomes. For example, stroke patients in Malawi cannot access acute treatments (thrombolysis or mechanical thrombectomy) as is the standard treatments elsewhere, and this is—despite having the expertise to administer them. We do not have appropriate treatments for acute inflammatory/autoimmune conditions, which unfortunately are quite common. This becomes frustrating and highlights the urgent need for improved neurology services.

### **What are your dreams and goals for the future?**

For most of my career, my goal was to become a neurologist. Now that I have achieved that, my aspirations have evolved. I want to contribute to building a robust neurology service in Malawi. This involves improving clinical care, fostering meaningful research and collaborations, and enhancing neurology education. I envision a future where Malawi has its own neurology training program, producing more neurologists to meet the growing demand and I would like to be part of the team that brings this to fruition. As a leader in this field, I aspire to influence and contribute to the advancement of neurology, not just in Malawi or the region, but on a global scale. I dream of a future where Malawi is no longer underserved in neurology, but instead, a model for how emerging health systems can thrive and contributing to cutting-edge research that answers questions relevant to the field of neurology

Beyond my professional work, I hope to balance my career with personal growth—traveling more, writing about my experiences, and staying connected with, and giving back to my community. At this stage, my focus is on making a meaningful and lasting impact both in my field and in my personal life.

### **What advice would you give someone considering a career in Neurology?**

Neurology is an exciting and rewarding field with immense opportunities, especially in Malawi. Whether your interest lies in clinical practice, research, or teaching, there is plenty of work to be done. However, the journey requires determination, resilience, and a willingness to train abroad, as neurology training is not yet available locally. For those considering this path, my advice is simple: pursue it with passion, stay curious, and be patient—the rewards are worth it.

### **What Is a common misconception about what you do?**

A common misconception is that neurologists and neurosurgeons are the same. Many people assume that every brain-related condition requires surgery, but most neurological disorders—such as stroke, epilepsy, neuropathies, and autoimmune disorders—are managed medically, not surgically. So, while we all treat disorders of the nervous system, a neurologist treats with medicine while neurosurgeons treat with surgery (simplistic explanation).

Another misconception is that neurology offers little to no treatment for most conditions. While some disorders are incurable, many can be managed effectively, improving patients' quality of life. Even for conditions like motor neuron disease, where prognosis is poor, an accurate diagnosis and proper counselling make a significant difference.

### **What else would you like people to know about Neurology in Malawi?**

Neurological disorders are a growing burden, affecting 1 in 3 people globally and leading causes of disability. Malawi's increasing life expectancy means more people will experience neurological conditions in their lifetime, yet we remain ill-equipped to handle them. With only two adult neurologists and one pediatric neurologist for Malawi's population of over 20 million, limited diagnostics, and many essential drugs unavailable, urgent investment is needed.

Neurology is an essential part of healthcare that deserves greater attention and investment. The increasing burden of neurological disorders requires attention from healthcare providers, researchers, and policymakers. I encourage young doctors to consider neurology, researchers to help define our burden, and policymakers to invest in building neurology services.

### **Outside the Hospital: Hobbies and Passions**

I am a social and extroverted person who enjoys spending time with friends, playing board games, hiking, and watching soccer. When alone, I listen to podcasts, read, and write—both academic and non-academic content. If I had more time, I would write more!

Though not asked, I think I would not feel-good finishing this without acknowledging all the people that believe in my dream and aspirations and have supported me throughout this journey. There are too many to mention but I am blessed with senior and accomplished people who are vested and invested in my success. I am grateful to you all!