

THE ONE SWAB SURGEON

Early days

Prof. Joseph Samuel Oliech (JSO) is the youngest boy in a family of 4 boys and 3 girls. He was born by the roadside in the morning of 22nd November 1945 in Kisumu West constituency in the present Kisumu County. His mother was on her way to the market place that morning when she developed labour pains and luckily a Canadian missionary called Miss Rees from the local Ogada AIC Mission happened to be nearby. Miss Rees assisted Oliech's mother in the delivery and later took baby Oliech and his mother to the local Health Centre. There were no systems of rooming in with the mothers at that time and therefore JSO never had maternal care in the early days of his life. The medical speciality was starting to evolve rapidly around that time and antibiotics had been discovered just a few years before and first used in 1948.

His parents named him after a quiet and honorable tribal leader known as senior chief Oliech who unfortunately died around the same time. The name Oliech is fairly common in Nyanza but its meaning is not known. At the time of JSO's birth, his father was working as a carpenter at Ogada mission following his return from World War 2 duties in Ethiopia where he was working as an artisan. Ogada Mission was an AIC Mission and it later became a secondary school.

He attended Ogada Primary School after which he went to Kakamega High School in 1960. In those days secondary education was organized by the British and his examination at Kakamega High School was administered in Kenya but prepared and marked in Britain. In those days preprimary was church organized and pre-secondary was British organized with the examination being set and marked abroad. He did his O levels (Cambridge) after which he proceeded for A-levels which he finished in 1965. Raising school fees was a challenge for his parents and education during the colonial era was difficult. The education system was very competitive and selection for advanced learning was very harsh and only the best progressed.

Higher Education

The East African University in Kampala was the only university in East Africa at the time and the University College Nairobi was its constituent college. It was first named The Technical College of East Africa in September 1951 when it received its charter and in April 1952 its foundation stone was laid. The Asian community in East Africa was around the same time planning to build a college of Arts, Science and Commerce in memory of Mahatma Gandhi. To avoid duplication of effort the Gandhi Memorial Academy Society agreed to merge their plans with those of the East African Governments. The Technical College of East Africa was as result of this merger renamed The Royal Technical College of East Africa in April 1954 and in April 1956 the first batch of students was enrolled. In July 1958 a working party commissioned by the East African Governments to advice on Higher Education in East Africa recommended construction and addition of appropriate facilities in the Royal Technical College to transform it into the second Inter-Territorial College in East Africa. The recommendation was accepted and on 25th June 1961 the Royal Technical College was transformed into the second university college in East Africa under the name, 'Royal College Nairobi'. On the attainment of University College status the institution got into a special collaboration in February 1961 which saw

students in the Faculties of Arts, Science and Engineering being awarded degrees of the University of London. In 1963, the extra-mural and social studies were introduced in the Royal University College Nairobi. In 1965 the Institute of Development Studies was established with Social Science and Cultural Divisions. On 20th May 1964 the Royal University College Nairobi became known as 'University College Nairobi'. The Faculty of Medicine was established on 3rd July 1967 and officially inaugurated on 7th March 1968. The pre-clinical departments were created at Chiromo Campus and the clinical departments 3 kilometres away at the Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) Campus. University College Nairobi also opened its doors to students in Faculties of Journalism (Main campus), Agriculture (Kabete campus) and Law (Main campus) in April, July and September 1970 respectively. On 1st July 1970 national universities were set up in Kampala (Uganda), Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar-Es-Salaam (Tanzania). In Kenya the University of Nairobi (UoN) came into being replacing University College Nairobi through an Act of Parliament (University of Nairobi Act 1970) which legally established it as a national and public institution of higher learning.

Meanwhile, JSO was nearing completion of his studies at Makerere University Medical School which he had joined in 1966. Pioneers ahead of him used to get licensure but the university later replaced this with a degree. He went to medical school at a time when medical technology was not as advanced as it is now and patients presented with diseases at advanced stages. In 1971 he qualified for award of MB ChB degree and proceeded to do his internship at Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) in 1972 after which he was posted to Bungoma District Hospital as a Medical Officer Health (MOH).

University of Nairobi and Kenyatta National Hospital

The Master of Medicine (MMed) degree programme at UoN Medical School started in 1972 as JSO was doing his internship at KNH. JSO was one of 6 very first students to apply for Master of Medicine in Surgery (MMed Surg) degree course. The others were Peter A Odhiambo, Gerishom Sande, Peter Abila and Dr Agola Onyango a lady doctor who later switched to radiology. JSO however opted out after only 6 months after he got a medical officer job in Ireland in United Kingdom (UK). In Ireland he worked and at the same time studied and in 1976, he passed his fellowship examinations and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Ireland (FRCS). He then worked at Derby Infirmary Hospital Midlands – UK.

Meanwhile Prof Ambrose Wasunna had become the chairman of the fledgling University of Nairobi (UoN) Department of Surgery and it was Ambrose who enticed him to join the department upon his return to Kenya in 1976 to help develop and expand the Department of Surgery at the medical school.

Some of the other faculty members who he teamed up with were Prof A Wasunna (Ward 5A), Gerald Neville (Ward 5A), Nelson Awori (Ward 5D), W. Warambo (5D), Roy Miller (in charge of 5B)

Perfection of Thyroid Surgery

JSO's ward at KNH was ward 5A which was popular and was renowned for its high level of teaching, research and thyroid surgery performed by JSO and Gerald Neville. Together with Prof Walter Gitau of UoN Dept of Medicine they published a lot in the proceedings of the East and Central African journal and the East African Medical Journal (EAMJ). They did a lot of thyroid related research including trying to establish why goitre was prevalent in Kenya. JSO specifically researched on relationship of culture and goitre among the communities (Kikuyu's mainly) around the mount Kenya region. He established that goitre was common due to the presence of high levels of goitrogens in the peoples' diet. The Kikuyu women especially) traditionally carry heavy loads on their backs and with straps suspended on their heads a practice which strengthens the strap muscles of the neck. The muscles hypertrophy and hide goiter if it occurs. There were many patients requiring thyroidectomy but unfortunately many had low haemoglobin levels which delayed surgery. They required blood transfusion or blood builders (haematinics) before surgery could be performed. Young JSO decided to find a solution for this challenge and he decided to work on making thyroidectomies bloodless. He decided to master the anatomy of the thyroid gland (especially the blood supply) through very fine dissection of cadavers at the UoN Department of anatomy. Assisted by technician Moses Julius Jalango Otieno he ended up dissecting about 25 cadavers during which time he also taught human anatomy to undergraduate and postgraduate students. This enabled him to master the variations of the blood supply of the thyroid gland and this helped him to perfect the art of thyroidectomy to a point where he could operate with minimal bleeding. His unit started doing more thyroidectomies as a result of this dedication and in time he became the mythical one swab thyroidectomy surgeon because of his bloodless surgical technique – he was famous for performing thyroidectomies with so little bleeding that only one swab was required. Through mastery of anatomy of the neck, he knew exactly which vessels would bleed. JSO is not one that hoards knowledge and some of his earliest students while he was in the thyroidectomy ward were Washington Gaya, John Adwok and Josphat Mulimba. The teaching in his unit was good and patients got good care.

Kidney Surgery

The one swab thyroid surgeon later serendipitously became involved in renal transplant surgery as a result of a complication which developed during surgery performed at Kapenguria District Hospital. In 1978 a missionary surgeon accidentally removed the only kidney of a child who had underwent surgery for an abdominal mass. The child was referred to KNH for specialized surgery and he became the first Kenyan to have a kidney transplant. Prof Nelson Awori, Dr Kagiri Ndirangu and Prof Julius Kyambi involved JSO in the transplant surgery and later it was decided that JSO be sent for specialized training in urology at the London University Institute of urology where he studied from 1980-1981. This marked the switch of JSO's sub specialization from thyroid surgery to urological surgery.

Following his return the Kidney transplant team was formally constituted in 1986 and it was decided that JSO returns to Oxford university in England once more for further specialization in transplant surgery alone which he did from 1987-1988. By the year 2013, the team was performing at least 60 live donor kidney transplants yearly. The 4 nephrologists who worked with the renal transplant team were; Mohammed Abdalla, Earnest Kioko, LS Otieno and Prof

Sam Ongeru, Kagiri Ndirangu who was at the time a tutorial fellow and a technician called Mr Johnson Wakhisi also worked with them. The two clinical pathologists who did the laboratory work up for the renal team were Peter Ojwang and Donald A.O. Orinda. Some of his renal patients who had renal transplant are married and one has four children and still communicates with him.

Director of Medical Services

JSO reluctantly left his students and patients to serve the country in a different capacity when he was appointed Director of Medical Services (DMS) over the radio at 4pm on 16th May 1989. He had no prior knowledge of the appointment and it was Prof Julius Kyambi who was the Chairman of the Department of Surgery at the time who first broke the news to him over the telephone. He replaced Prof Tom Ogada a former Dean of UoN Medical School in a position with the heavy responsibility of trying to achieve health for all by the year 2000. The minister for health at the time was Mr Mwai Kibaki and the permanent secretary was Mr David M. Mbiti.

He joined the Ministry of Health at a time when Nyayo Wards had been constructed but the ministry was grappling with the problems of the AIDS scourge, drug shortages and a meningitis outbreak mainly in slums and prisons. In 1990 he exposed a financial scam involving drug purchases which resulted in the sacking of 22 staff of the ministry's accounts department. The Doctor:Patient ratio was 1:50000 at the time he took up the new job and he started working towards an improved Ratio of 1:25000 in 10 years following his appointment. In 1989 he encouraged and supported the development of the Faculty of Health Sciences of Moi University. He also spearheaded restructuring and streamlining of the Ministry of Health to enhance service delivery. Some of the strategies employed were; cost sharing and the directive making Hospital Secretaries Authority to Incur Expenditure (AIE) holders.

As DMS he also successfully organized the district focus for health care and structured the AIDS system: Prevention, VCT. He also developed the Kenya referral system for health care and organized for specialized training of Doctors in Kenya. Some of the specialists who benefitted from these were Dr Cleopa Mailu (Genetics), Mr Mohamud Quereshi (Neurosurgery) and Prof Herbert Oburra (Ear Nose & Throat surgery). A scheme of service for Nutritionists, Physiotherapists, and Community Health Workers was prepared during his time as DMS. Doctors' poor pay was another challenge which JSO faced as DMS and he experienced one country wide strike and managed to avert one.

AIDS was first diagnosed in Kenya in 1984 and by 1989 when Prof Oliech was appointed DMS it was spreading fast and there being no cure JSO advocated for discipline and behavior change and raising awareness about the disease and how to prevent it. He soon spearheaded the launch of AIDS awareness campaigns which included an AIDS awareness week. These efforts were derailed somewhat when scientists and herbalists claimed that they had discovered a cure for AIDS in 1990. Evidence was lacking and therefore the DMS could not support the claims but the Kenya government nonetheless issued statements intimating discovery of a cure for AIDS. The discovery of KEMROM by Kenyan scientists at KEMRI was made public during his tenure on 6th February 1990. On 1st June that year (1990) the president declared that KEMRON was the world's first effective anti-AIDS drug (The Weekly Review, June 8, 1990). Prof.Oliech said that

KEMROM was a Kenyan innovation and was an interferon supplied by Hayashibara Biochemical Laboratories of Japan through Amarillo Cell Culture Company (ACC) of Texas, USA whose local counterpart was Innovative Therapeutics Limited (ITL) (The weekly Review, August 31 1990). Later that year, Prof. Oliech stated that KEMRI's contribution to the innovation was in deciding to use the sublingual method of administration and that Kenya's trials of the drug were the first to provide the efficacy and safety of the low-dose oral interferons in the management of AIDS. The therapeutic value of interferons in animals and humans, was at the time being investigated by major multinationals (Weekly Review, Sept 7, 1990). Controversies arose over KEMRON's development and ownership and being the DMS at the time JSO inevitably got embroiled in it. By December 1990 the Kemron euphoria had dissipated and the World Health organization (WHO) were not convinced by spectacular clinical results reported by the local scientists. JSO as DMS could only endorse it for clinical trials and not for treatment but the government thought otherwise. This impasse resulted in him being relieved off his duties as DMS through a radio announcement in 1991, 2 weeks after attending a cabinet meeting in Eldoret to discuss KEMRON.

Another major event which rocked the office of the DMS was the death of Minister Robert John Ouko on 13th February 1990. Ouko had disappeared a day after flying into Kenya from USA and his body was later found at Got Alila. JSO was ordered by the government to travel to the scene of crime with a team to retrieve the body and transport it to Nairobi. He was a key person in the funeral committee chaired by Dr Bodo. He subsequently experienced trying moments during his involvement in the investigations of the minister's death and as DMS he had to give evidence in Kisumu to the Justice Gicheru commission set up to enquire into Ouko's death.

Return to Academia

JSO retired from his teaching job at UoN in 2015 after serving for a total of 39 years and 5 months as a permanent employee. The university however requested him to stay on and he is still teaching at the department of surgery on contract basis. He championed the introduction of the OSCEs method of examining which he says is a fairer system. He has served Kenya diligently and selflessly in different capacities and has taught many at UoN – very few surgeons in Kenya will fail to mention one way that JSO has impacted on his or her life. He would like to see unification of the curriculum of medical schools in Kenya and facilities shared. His students are luckier than he as medical technology has developed and they are given didactic lectures unlike when he was training. He has published extensively and has received numerous awards locally and abroad.

Professor JS Oliech is also a director of Nairobi Hospice and an honorary Secretary of Association of Surgeons of East Africa (ASEA). He is married with 4 grown children one of whom (Gerald Beyo Oliech) is named after his surgeon colleague Gerald Neville. Dr Gerald Neville became chairman of the board of Gertrudes Children's Hospital (GCH) after he retired from UoN and he later became a farmer after developing arthritis of the hand. Professor's last born son Sammy Oliech is a member of the Kenya 7s rugby team which won the coveted Singapore rugby series and which participated in the 2016 Olympic games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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