

THE BIG READ

Dr Jimmy Alele is a Ugandan endocrinologist based in the US. He was recently elected as a fellow to the prestigious American College of Physicians. Carol Nantukunda had a chat with him on his journey from Uganda to the helm of the global medical profession.

Congratulations on this award! What does it mean for you?
Most of the people who have had the greatest impact on my career have been Fellows of the American College of Physicians. They are the pinnacle of our amazing profession. Through them, I have come to truly appreciate the marvels of modern medicine, and how this amazing profession has improved the lives of millions of people around the world. I am most delighted to be considered one of them.

Tell us what being elected to this fellowship is about?
It is an honour that the

How Alele journeyed from Lira to



Dr Alele went to Makerere University Medical School before relocating to the US

college bestows on physicians who have demonstrated commitment to elevating the quality of care among their patient population and the broader community. It recognizes physician

excellence in patient care, research and teaching. The majority of candidates for election are certified in internal medicine or one of the subspecialties thereof. They are nominated by

peers who know them well enough to attest to their character, achievements and contributions. Being a fellow gives one the platform to be most involved with the college in a number

of ways, including leadership, mentorship and voting.

Who is Dr. Alele?
I was born in Dokolo district (then Lira district). I am the last born of Thomas Odur and the late Christine Odur of Kanyasi sub-county. I went to

in Kangari Primary School (P1 and P2) in Dokolo. Then I went to Orum Primary School (Orum sub-county) in P3 and Anwaga Primary School (Kwera sub-county) from P4 to P7.

I changed primary schools a lot because my father worked for the local government as a sub-county chief and he was transferred to those regions. I did my O'level at Comboni College (Lira district) and my A'level education at Busoga College Mwen in Jinja district, before going to Makerere University Medical School.

I did my internal medicine residency training at St. Barnabas Hospital (Cornell University Medical Center) and fellowship training at the University of Illinois at Birmingham.

As a child, did you see yourself becoming a doctor?
My father's brother, the uncle after whom I was named

(Augustine Alele) is a retired medical assistant. Early in my life, I observed what he did and I believe that is how my fascination with medicine started.

Any other childhood memories?
I remember my father and I taking a walk in the garden the evening before the Primary Leaving Examinations. He kept telling me not to be afraid of the exams and to make sure I slept enough.

I do not know if I looked positively, but that night I slept well, got up in the morning well-rested and the rest is history. He also told me that sometimes, you have to walk alone. I look back and many times (in fact most times) I have had to walk alone to get where I am.

You have worked in the US for over two decades. What has been your experience?
I have been an attending physician in the US since 1998. After medical school at Makerere, I was posted to White Hospital for my internship. I then worked for a year after completing internship, before I left for the US. It took

an additional five years to become an endocrinologist.

Medical practice in the US is thorough with emphasis on continuing medical education, which is the one way to stay abreast with the rapid developments in medicine. The American medical institutions and hospitals provide great support, which has allowed me to decide what direction I like to go in my career.

We also work in a highly collaborative environment, which puts the patient's interest at the centre of everything we do and that is gratifying.

Currently, I work at a consultant physician and teaching facility in the residency programme at TelHealth Corporation in Cincinnati Ohio. TelHealth is the largest health medical organisation in Cincinnati.

What is that case you have handled that you will never forget?
Three years ago, a 45-year-old male by the name of John came in to see me for the management of diabetes. He was a school bus driver and had fallen asleep behind the wheel due to low blood sugar and ended up hitting a pole. Things looked very bad, he was about to lose his job.

Therefore, we put him through a class and started adjusting his insulin. He was lucky in that the government was in the process of approving one of the most advanced insulin pumps on the market (Medtronic 670G insulin pump). I put this patient on the new pump and his blood sugars have since come under good control. He is back behind the wheel and now drives two hours to see me at my new practice.

What motivates you?
You cannot do what we do in medicine, unless you love it. Endocrinology can get very stimulating and engaging from an intellectual standpoint. Quite often, I find myself looking at a patient in light of a textbook description. They can become very intriguing. Endocrinology can also get intense. However, the joy of making simple interventions and next time you see the patients, they are looking different, can be very rewarding.

What have been some of the achievements in your career?
In the teaching institutions where I have worked, I have enjoyed teaching medical students, residents and

fellows. I have enjoyed clinical research and have published several papers in prestigious journals. I have also worked with professional organisations like the International Society of Clinical Endocrinology (ISCE), where I have held several offices, including chairman of the certification council and member of the board of directors.

In terms of clinical practice, I have been lucky to be affiliated with top-rated institutions, which emphasise excellence. Just like my fellow colleagues, I have had my own share of the recognitions. For example, I was recently voted one of America's best doctors.

When will you return to Uganda? We do not have many specialists like you.
I know that Uganda deserves good physicians. A country needs to do all it can to attract and retain talent in the field of medicine. Makerere trains very talented doctors every year. That is the same for the newer universities. The country needs to acknowledge their talent and figure out a way to keep them from getting so disgruntled that they end up taking their talent to other places. We love our country and hope that our people will be taken care of by the best doctors, whether we are among them or not.

Any challenges?
The medical field is very competitive, time-consuming and at times, very stressful. You have to maintain your focus and be fully alert at the most critical times. In addition, medicine cannot do without technology. You have to sharpen your computer skills.

Outside your normal work schedule, do you like the weather, food and the people?
The American Society is very diverse and we have not had any problems integrating. On weather, spring and autumn are the best seasons of the year. However, we have learned to cope with the heat (in summer) and the snow (in winter).

Do you have a pastime?
Yeni Badminton, but have not had much time to play it recently. I still jog, read novels and watch movies when I have the time.

Do you feel homesick, sometimes?
From time to time. This was particularly so when we first moved to the US, when it was very difficult to talk to our parents directly. Things have changed a lot with the coming of cellphones. However, we still miss the face-to-face encounters.

Tell us about your family. Do you live with them in the US?
I am married to Christine Makuru. We met at Makerere University in 1986 and married in 1989. We have been blessed with three children. Our oldest daughter is an attorney, our middle son is a fiscal analyst and our youngest has one more year before starting college. We have an abundance of extended family in Lira and Kampala.

My father, Odur lives in Kampala and our father-in-law lives in western Uganda. Your Makuru reside on Makerere hill in Seema district.
What message would you give to a Ugandan child looking up to you?
Something my father kept telling me in primary school: listen to what your teacher is saying, whether you are in P1 or Senior Six. Everything else can wait. Teachers have the magic that will teach you on the path of success.

NEW SECTION

helm of America's medical profession



The Aleles have three children who are also based in the US. The eldest daughter is an attorney; the son a fiscal analyst and the last born is soon joining university

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NEW SECTION

Endocrinology

Talking about becoming an endocrinologist by specialty. What does this entail?
An endocrinologist is a specialist who treats disorders associated with hormones.

Hormones are substances that regulate essential elements of bodily functions, like growth and development, body weight, body temperature, blood pressure and blood sugar levels. Hormones are secreted directly from the endocrine glands into the bloodstream. The endocrine glands include the pancreas, thyroid gland and pituitary glands to mention a few. Endocrine diseases develop when the levels of hormones are too high or too low in the blood, or when the body reacts inappropriately (over- or under-reacts) to what is otherwise an appropriate level of hormones. Examples of endocrine diseases include diabetes, osteoporosis (weak bones) and hypothyroidism.

Endocrine system

