

# DR WASUNNA'S ATTITUDE DETERMINED HER DESTINY

AS WE CELEBRATE WOMEN'S MONTH, WE HAVE BEEN PROFILING WOMEN WHO HAVE HAD GREAT ACHIEVEMENTS IN THEIR RESPECTIVE FIELDS. TODAY, **LILLIAN. N. MAGEZI** BRINGS YOU UGANDAN-BORN DR MONIQUE WASUNNA, WHO IS BASED IN NAIROBI

A physician and a specialist in infectious diseases and tropical medicine, Dr Monique Wasunna has excelled in the field of scientific research aimed at developing treatments for neglected tropical diseases (NTDs).

Wasunna says she was first exposed to NTDs while studying for her degree in medicine at the University of Nairobi, which contained a module on tropical medicine. After medical school, she interacted with patients during internship at Kenyatta Hospital.

"Most of the diseases did not have effective treatment and diagnostics. For example, for leishmaniasis, doctors were forced to remove patients' spleens in cases that were difficult to treat.

(Leishmaniasis, commonly referred to as kal-azar, is a condition that affects internal organs. It is transmitted by sandflies and in Uganda, it is endemic in Karamoja). Removal of the spleen left patients exposed to infections that necessitated them to be on lifelong vaccines. Many people were dying, so I wanted to get involved," Wasunna says.

In 1983, she joined the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) and was posted to the Centre for Clinical Research (CCR), where the flagship project was a clinical trial for leishmaniasis.

"This increased my interest in NTDs and when I was sponsored to study my Master's degree at London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), I decided to focus my project on leishmaniasis," she says.

Wasunna also did a PhD in Clinical Medicine with special focus on leishmaniasis. After which she became a principal investigator



WASUNNA  
EXAMINING A KAL-  
AZAR PATIENT IN  
KACHELIBA, WEST  
POKOT, KENYA

for a leishmaniasis treatment study supported by World Health Organisation (WHO). Since then, she has continued to do clinical trials with an emphasis in NTDs.

Wasunna became the first female director of CCR in 1996, the first and only female acting director for KEMRI in 2007 and she has been the director of the Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative (DNDi) regional office since 2009, having been part of the team that created it in 2005.

DNDi is a research and development organisation that brings together researchers from universities and industry to develop medicines for neglected and poverty-related

diseases.

## Wasunna the director

As the director of the East Africa Regional Office for DNDi, Wasunna is accountable for the implementation of the organisational action plan at the regional level and is required to contribute to regional strategy development.

"I am also responsible for stakeholder outreach as well as policy and advocacy programmes in addition to supporting research and development activities," she says.

Wasunna leads a team of about 37 staff and acts as mentor for senior clinical managers. As director, she led the organisation in conducting important studies on leishmaniasis,

## DID YOU KNOW?

WASUNNA WAS THE FIRST FEMALE DIRECTOR OF CCR IN 1996, THE FIRST AND ONLY FEMALE ACTING DIRECTOR FOR THE KENYA MEDICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE IN 2007



## POSITIONS HELD

- Director DNDi since 2007
- First and only woman to reach the rank of acting director for KEMRI.
- Founding chair of the Leishmaniasis East Africa Platform, a platform that brings together researchers, institutions and ministries of health from Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda to conduct clinical research for leishmaniasis.
- Member of the International Bioethics Committee of UNESCO and a member of the World Health Organisation Scientific Advisory Committee on Accessible Quality Assured Diagnostics.
- Fellow of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene
- Member of the Kenya Medical Association and Kenya Association of Physicians.

mycetoma and paediatric HIV in five countries. As a result, the African regional office has delivered two treatments that have been adopted for use globally.

Wasunna believes that what has helped her survive in this field is her general attitude towards life.

"I was close to my father, who encouraged me to pursue everything I set my mind on. So, I do not feel limited due to my gender, but I see myself as a human being who can do anything I put my mind on. This has given me the ability to step into this difficult field with confidence. I have this attitude both in and out of work and it has enabled me to step into positions of leadership from the beginning," she says.

Wasunna adds that in her position, she strives to create an enabling environment for gender equality, where both male and female respect each other. "Because of this, I also receive

the same respect from the people I supervise. I also perform my duties with confidence and I do not give a chance to anyone — male or female — to treat me differently."

## Challenges

Wasunna acknowledges that one of the challenges women face is people assuming that the woman is subordinate to the man.

"I remember when I was a medical officer at Kenyatta Hospital, people would assume that the women were nurses and the men doctors. Since I try not to be defined by what people think about me, I did not take it personally, but I made sure I corrected them," she says.

Wasunna notes that women also face discrimination, especially when it comes to attaining positions of authority. She discloses that there are

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## editor's letter

## We can all promote women's causes

As we celebrate Women's Day and Women's month, we have dedicated space to recognise women who have made it in different fields, especially male-dominated fields.

In today's edition, we celebrate Dr. Monique Wasunna, a Ugandan-born researcher who is based in Kenya. Wasunna's journey to the top of her organisation is characterised by determination, hard work and sacrifice.

However, the main take-home message from the article is that the mind is a strong thing and so, women need to first believe in themselves and be confident in order to achieve whatever they want to achieve. I wish you a nice week.

Lillian Namusoke Magezi

## THINK ABOUT IT

**“I perform my duties with confidence and I do not give chance to anyone to treat me differently,”**  
**–Monique Wasunna –**

## who we are

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## WOMEN SHOULD BELIEVE IN THEMSELVES – WASUNNA

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misconceptions that women cannot get to the top, especially in such a difficult field without participating in underhanded activities or without the help of men. In addition, she says it is tough for many women to balance work and family life, which means that some aspects of their lives suffer.

Wasunna advises women in science to believe in themselves, follow their dreams, carry themselves with confidence and not see themselves as inferior.

“The mind is powerful; it will always do what you tell it to do. If you consider something difficult, your mind will accept that it is difficult. Science requires a lot of hard work and I encourage women to do their best, be trustworthy, share ideas with others and also help other women,” she says.

## Education

Wasunna studied at Tororo Girls High School, where she was a prefect. As a young girl, Wasunna was an all-rounder; she loved reading, especially science books, but she was also involved in choir and drama. Her dream was to work as an airline crew. However, when she was in high school, her sister suffered from measles, which was the turning point for Wasunna's career choices.

“The doctor told my mother that my sister could die of complications and my mother was worried. I felt helpless and told myself that I would never want my mother to go through such an ordeal again. This is when I decided to be a medical doctor. I feel that what I do now is a result of that experience,” she adds.

After high school, Wasunna left Uganda on a student exchange programme to study medicine at the University of Nairobi School of Medicine.

## Achievements

Wasunna says she has had many achievements, but by far, her greatest achievement is her family.

“I am a proud mother of three grown children who have excelled in their lives and I am married to a wonderful man who has supported me all the way,” she says.

Wasunna says at work, her greatest achievement is the fact that after many years of hard work, she has become a recognised leader in science.

## Lowest moment

My first lowest moment was when I lost my father in 1985. I was in the UK studying for my masters when he died. My second was when a young boy who was my patient died in my arms. He was treated for leishmaniasis, but did



DR WASUNNA WITH PRIME MINISTER DR RUHAKANA RUGUNDA AND THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE SECRETARY IN THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH KENYA DR RASHID AMAN DURING THE 11TH PARTNERS' MEETING OF THE DNDI IN KAMPALA IN OCTOBER 2018

## WHAT PEOPLE SAY

## Linnet Otieno, DNDI senior regional communication manager (Eastern Africa)

Dr Wasunna has been my supervisor for almost five years. She has offered great guidance to the office, especially the communications function, which I lead. She is always accessible, ready to listen, supportive of our activities and gives us room to be creative and innovative. More so, in instances when I needed her advice in issues unrelated to work, she has been available and helpful.



## Prof. Joseph O. Olobo (PhD), professor of Immunology Makerere University

I have been principal investigator (PI) for over 10 years on a number of clinical trials for different drugs to find a better cure for kal-azar. So, I work closely with Monique. I find working with her motivating. She has good interpersonal skills and smiles even under stressful conditions, which encourages one to work harder. She is dedicated, knowledgeable and a team player. From her, I have learnt patience, non confrontational and a friendly approach to difficult issues. Monique is sociable, likeable and motherly.



## Dr. Patrick Sagaki, medical superintendent of Amudat Hospital and site investigator for research done by DNDI

Amudat Hospital is one of the sites supported by DNDI to conduct clinical trials for new drugs, so I work with Dr Wasunna. She loves her work and offers us unrelenting support in carrying out our duties. In addition, she always supports those who want to advance in their education. She supported me to acquire a master's degree in tropical clinical medicine. She has also mentored me in managing the Kal-azar treatment centre at Amudat. She is a good administrator with the ability to handle challenges in a non-confrontational manner. She has good solutions for most of the challenges we encounter as rural and resource-constrained health workers. I have learnt from her that being easy and supportive to your subordinates yields better results than being tough and confrontational.

not respond because he had a fungal infection.

## Quick facts

## ■ Role model

My father taught me discipline, work ethic and leadership. He used to encourage us to wake up early to go

to school. He also ensured that chores were equally distributed among boys and girls. This remains my work ethic and attitude to date.

My mother taught me how to be kind, caring and helpful. She taught me how to love other people.

## BACKGROUND

Wasunna was born in Soroti in eastern Uganda to a Rwandan mother and a father from Bukedea in Teso sub-region.

She is the second born in a family of 12 siblings and many step brothers and sisters.

Since 1981, Monique has been married to Prof. Aggrey Wasunna, a professor of paediatrics and neonatal medicine at the University of Nairobi. Wasunna met her husband while in third year of medical school.

“After we graduated, we got married and I stayed in Kenya,” Wasunna adds.

The couple has three children (two of them are medical doctors and one is a lawyer) and two grandchildren. Wasunna thanks her husband for always being there for her and supporting her dreams. She adds that at the start of her career, she had to be away from the country to pursue further education.

“My children were very young and my husband took care of them alone.”

## ■ Motivation

My family motivates me to face each day with new energy. I am also motivated by my work, especially because we are working for patients who are helpless and underprivileged.

## ■ Philosophy

The philosophy I live by is: I have to take my place at home in taking care of my family as a loving mother and wife. At work, I have to always listen and be open to learning. No one knows everything and should be willing to learn from others. It is also important to have the right attitude. I am always willing to be flexible, realistic and adaptive. I never allow myself to have a losing attitude. However, I also remember that failure is normal in life and an opportunity to learn.

## ■ Hobbies

I love football and I have been an avid supporter of Liverpool since the 1980s. I also like music and dancing.

## ■ Likes/ dislikes

I hate dishonesty. I do not like it when people lie to me. Even if the situation is difficult, start by telling the truth and then we can discuss further. I like it when people treat each other with humility, respect and integrity. It is also important to be grateful for every small thing in life

## ■ Link to Uganda

I come to Uganda often, both for work and to see my family (my mother and siblings).

## ■ Where do you consider home?

I consider Kenya my home. It is where my children have grown up. I do not plan to come back and live in Uganda, but I will keep on visiting.