

KZN's first black female neurosurgeon loves taking away people's pain

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The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health has welcomed a new member into its neurosurgery fraternity – and she is the first Black African woman from KZN to graduate as a neurosurgeon. (Neurosurgeons are medical doctors who specialise in performing surgical treatments of the brain or nervous system).

Now it is hoped that Dr Nomsa Shezi's achievement will encourage young people in general – and young women in particular – to pursue a career in the field of medicine.

Having completed her undergraduate studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2008, Dr Shezi, 32, is based at Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central Hospital. She graduated in October 2017, obtaining a fellowship from the college of neurosurgery, under the College of Medicine South Africa.

Growing up during the height of the HIV epidemic in the late 1990s, all that Dr Nomusa Shezi dreamed of was to one day be able to give sick people hope and nurse them back to good health. Her dream not only came true, but she has now made history.

Born and raised in Pietermaritzburg, Dr Shezi, who matriculated from Pietermaritzburg Girls High School, recalls: *I think growing up in the heart of the HIV epidemic and having parents who did not shield me from the suffering going on around me in some way urged in me a desire to help, to find a way to be a source of hope in my country.*

From a young age I have always wanted to be a doctor. In fact, I remember writing an essay in grade 3, and saying that when I grow up I want to find the cure for HIV. I never imagined myself doing anything but being a doctor.



She attributes most of her success to hard work and the influence, guidance and support from her parents. Her father is a church founder and leader, and her mother (Sibongile Shezi) once

worked for the KZN Department of Health as a health district director in UMgungundlovu and eThekweni.

Dr Shezi fell in love with neurosurgery after reading about the exploits of Dr Ben Carson, from the US, who separated conjoined twins at the age of 35.

But to reach her destination, she had work hard and make a number of sacrifices, including having no social life at all. She would bury her head in her books, seeing very little of her family. Her friends even stopped inviting her to social gatherings because she was always busy.

Even when she became a doctor, she did not slip into a comfort zone. *I wanted to do the most good in a field that would keep me on my toes, never feeling like I have fully expanded my skill or knowledge.*

Such values epitomise the Hippocratic Oath and Guidelines for Good Practice in the Healthcare Professions.

When asked what she enjoys the most about being a doctor in general, and a neurosurgeon in particular, she said: *As a doctor, I enjoy being able to help people at their most vulnerable; whether it is through providing hope or comfort when science fails. As a Neurosurgeon, nothing is more rewarding than seeing someone come into the hospital in severe pain or with a marked disability, and after intervention and rehabilitation, seeing them smile because they can now walk without pain or they can return to work and lead a normal life.*

However, she has had to overcome numerous obstacles that have so far ensured that countrywide, there are only 5 Black African female Neurosurgeons - with the first having only qualified in 2013.

We are still working in an environment where surgery in general is considered a 'manly' field. So, Neurosurgery becomes an even harder field to crack. Medicine, more so surgery, is an apprenticeship. Someone needs to be willing to teach you the skills (after the theory is complete) and as a female, surrounded by 99% males who do not always think you deserve to be one of "them", finding that mentorship and guidance is not always easy. And so, females gravitate towards 'less stressful' fields.

Even as she has made history, Dr Shezi has a few more personal goals that she would like to achieve in the near future. *>My mid-term goals are to complete my Masters, and continue to learn and grow. My long-term plan is to create and be a part of a functional Neurosurgery Unit in KZN, at Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central Hospital. I would like to build a team that would treat movement disorders, severe epilepsy and perform awake surgery. This would not just save the government millions of rand on life-long treatment, but more importantly it will provide quality of life to hundreds of thousands of patients in this province.*

In the meantime, she hopes that her amazing feat will spur others to follow in her footsteps.

And she has a message for them. *No one will believe in your dream and vision more than you do. So, listen and take the criticism, but do not let it have the final say in your life. Look for and find mentors as early as possible. The fact that not everyone is your cheerleader doesn't mean everyone is your enemy. Take time to always evaluate what you are doing and whether that is adding or taking a brick away from the house you are building.*

Congratulating Dr Shezi on her amazing feat, KwaZulu-Natal MEC for Health, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, said: *Educating a girl child is such an important investment for the country but for Dr Shezi, it is even more special. She is the first Black African female neurosurgeon in the province, which means that our province will be placed in a unique position with this achievement. As the Department of Health and KZN government, we are proud of what she has done and wish that her ground-breaking achievement will open the doors for others.*