

A passion to fight cancer : the heart-warming story of 33 year-old newly-graduated oncologist Dr Nokwanda Zuma

13 June 2018

At the age of just 33, Dr Nokwanda Zuma has become only the second Black African oncologist in KwaZulu-Natal. She graduated last month after completing her training at Tygerberg Hospital in Cape Town and is now based at Addington Hospital, where she is in charge of radiotherapy.

Last week, she treated the first patient since the restoration of oncology services on 06 June 2018. This process to restore oncology services at Addington Hospital has entailed the repair of one oncology machine and installation of another, brand new one, which will be ready for use in July – giving the hospital capacity to eventually treat between 40 – 50 patients per day. In this candid interview, Dr Zuma reflects, in her own words, on her long and arduous journey towards becoming a medical specialist; the huge personal sacrifices she had to make along the way; and her hopes and dreams for people who need cancer treatment in KwaZulu-Natal.

I was born and bred in Pietermaritzburg. I was a very active child, hence my father named me Philile (the one who is full of life) when I was born.

I'm the second daughter of Mbali and Christopher Zuma, a deputy principal and retired manager at the Department of Education respectively. My older sister is a chartered accountant and my younger sister is a financial manager, and we are very close.

I grew up at Imbali township where my fondest memories are of us playing in the streets from dawn until dusk. My parents are kind-hearted, ambitious and hardworking people and those qualities I also inherited. However, they were very strict. They encouraged us to study and create the life we wanted to live in order to be happy.

My parents have been very supportive of my career. I think I surprised them a bit when I said I wanted to specialize in Radiation Oncology. They have always been supportive, even making financial sacrifices just so I could study medicine. I want to make them proud.



Dr Nokwanda Zuma

They didn't completely understand at the time what radiation oncology entailed. But the more they saw friends and family being diagnosed and dying from cancer, the more they understood the need for, and importance of, doctors who could treat cancer. So, my parents are my greatest influencers.

I also look up to Ms Judy Dlamini who is a qualified doctor, business woman, mother and wife. She does it all with finesse. She also has overcome class, race and gender discrimination, which is something that black women face every day.

I matriculated at Pietermaritzburg High School for Girls where I was a prefect and vice house captain. I was a nerd in high school, studying all the time. I knew then that I wanted to become a doctor and that the only way I was going to get there was through discipline and studying.

When you are a Doctor you are always studying or on call and when you specialise, the workload makes it hard to have a social life. So I was that person who was always apologising for not making it to or leaving early at a family or social event.

I decided in 2012 that I wanted to be an Oncologist. A year later, my step- grandmother Peggy Zuma, an ex-Matron nurse from Edendale hospital got diagnosed with malignant melanoma. Oncology has always been my destiny, but my step- grandmother just took away any doubt of anything else. I was working at Greys Hospital Oncology at the time. She chose to be treated in a public hospital as opposed to going to a private hospital because her grand-daughter was there.

My Maternal grandmother Eustacia Gumbi was an orthopaedic nurse at King Edward and Prince Mshiyeni Memorial Hospital. They both had a strong influence and support through my studying. My father's biological mother was also diagnosed with cervical cancer and treated at Addington hospital 20 years and she's still alive. That's why it's important for me to see Addington hospital's oncology department functioning well.

Oncology is unique in that there's the medical part and then the radiotherapy part. As an oncologist, I have to tell a patient that they have cancer and the immediate thought for them is

that, 'I'm going to die.' It takes a Doctor with empathy and soft skills to be able to reassure them that, 'I will be there with you throughout this journey and I will do my best, no matter what the outcome.'

I've trained for 9 years in total. I did my undergraduate studying at the UKZN medical school which I completed in 5 years, then I spent 4 years specialising. I did my internship at Prince Mshiyeni Memorial Hospital and my community service at Krugersdorp, West Rand Health department.

I truly enjoy treating patients, interacting with their families as well as the technical part of radiotherapy. We use advanced machines and software to give the best treatment to patients. The biggest challenge in oncology is accepting that the disease is sometimes stronger, stronger than a patient's will to fight... stronger than any chemotherapy or radiotherapy you prescribe. And they will eventually pass away. My role as their Doctor is to make them as comfortable as possible.

The hardest part in my training was when my aunt passed away 2 weeks before my final exams and I couldn't go to the funeral in Durban from Cape Town. I was literally crying while studying.

What helped me get this far is my perseverance and knowing that the goal is to become a specialist. I had a community to serve and the only way to do that is by becoming the best at what I do. My friends and family have also been very supportive especially when the studying got really tough.

I am ambitious, focused, kind-hearted, hard-working, and I love to dance and laugh. I am a hip hop and R&B fan, so my top 5 artists would be Drake, Kwesta, Nasty C, Sjava and Amanda Zulu.

>My philosophy in life is "Hardships prepare the ordinary for the extraordinary" - that is what keeps me going.

There has been an increase in incidence of cancer both in South Africa and elsewhere. This is due to viruses, immunosuppression, lifestyle choices and genetics. A developing country like South Africa needs to increase the awareness of cancer at the primary health care setting. We need to improve the way we diagnose our patients and I strongly feel that oncology needs to be included as part of undergrad training for doctors.

I believe we have only a few Oncologists because cancer wasn't a common disease in the past. But more people are now being diagnosed with cancer and with that, knowledge and technology is advancing accordingly. More doctors are interested in learning and I believe if more centres are created to provide registrar training, there will be more oncologists.

My advice to people who want to follow in my footsteps would be that nothing is impossible if it's your dream. The road to becoming a specialist is long, but once you get there it's definitely worth it. There is nothing as rewarding as seeing a patient smile or seeing them being cured from cancer.

My passion for oncology is what keeps me going. I would like to improve the services we currently offer in KwaZulu-Natal. I would also like to continue to study and do my PhD in the next 5 years.

When the time is right I do plan to start a family. I love children, so I'm hoping to have at least 2 children. I've seen the importance of having siblings and family the older I get, and I definitely want to give that to my children.