

Inspirational Women in Surgery: Prof. Afua A.J. Hesse, Paediatric Surgeon, Ghana

Florence Dedey¹ · Adam Gyedu²

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Prof. Afua Hesse is the first female Paediatric Surgeon in Ghana who has achieved many ‘firsts’ in her lifetime, providing inspiration in her country [1]. Prof. Hesse was born to parents who were both educators. Her father treated his male and female children equally, and so she says “I felt empowered right from when I was little to do anything I wanted”. At the age of 4 years, she declared that she was

going to be a Paediatric Surgeon and never wavered from that intent. She is a practical person and likes to see instant results, and a surgical career satisfied that need.

She trained at the University of Ghana Medical School (UGMS) from 1971 to 1976 for her MBChB and started her surgery residency in 1980. She subsequently completed surgery training in the UK and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Edinburgh in 1983. She is also a Fellow of the West African College of Surgeons (WACS) and a foundation Fellow of the Ghana College of Physicians and Surgeons (GCPS).

She worked as a Clinical Fellow at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Bristol from 1983 to 1988, when she returned to Ghana to lecture in UGMS, her alma mater. She had great mentors, including the late Prof. E. A Badoe who arranged for her posting in the UK. There were not many female role models in the field at the time, especially in Ghana. She was the only Paediatric Surgeon for the entire Southern Ghana for over 5 years in the early 1990s and impacted the lives of many children who needed surgery. She trained many generations of subsequent Paediatric Surgeons in Ghana and contributed significantly to the training of surgeons in Nigeria through the WACS. She is well-published and has contributed chapters to many Paediatric Surgery textbooks relating to Africa in particular.

Aside her impact as an educator, she has also led numerous innovations to improve the quality of surgical service provision. These include establishing the first Well-Woman’s clinic in Ghana, staffed by female doctors. This clinic aims to give more women the confidence in seeking help for their reproductive health. She helped establish the Hospitality section in the Department of Surgery, which has improved the patient experience in the hospital. As the first female Director of Medical Affairs at Korle Bu

✉ Florence Dedey
flodedey@yahoo.com
Adam Gyedu
drgyedu@gmail.com

¹ Department of Surgery, University of Ghana Medical School, Accra, Ghana

² Department of Surgery, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

Teaching Hospital, she led improvements in the quality of care and safety provided by the hospital by introducing the modified WHO Patient Safety Checklist, and initiated the refurbishment and technological update of the operating theatres dedicated solely to Paediatric Surgery.

She built international collaborations to improve the management of anorectal malformations of children, and as CEO of the largest referral centre in the country, she championed the building of a renal centre.

She has served as External Examiner for several medical schools in Ghana over the years and is an Examiner for the WACS and GCPS. She is currently President of the Accra College of Medicine, a private medical school co-founded by her family in 2015, which has graduated 3 classes of doctors so far to augment the needs of the country.

According to Prof. Hesse, “Being the only female for many years in the field of surgery in Ghana did have challenges and was certainly very lonely” but her faith has been her bulwark and she believes that determination and

discipline can enable anyone to achieve even more than they could imagine. One yet unsolved problem that Prof. Hesse identifies is the high burden of unmet needs for neonatal surgical care that has resulted in long surgery waiting times. She believes more paediatric surgeons, and paediatric anaesthesiologists need to be trained to enable safer outcomes for neonates, in particular.

Reference

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