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"I wanted to be where the answers to diseases come from"



Researcher with a sense of responsibility: Nyanda Elias Ntinginya

Dr. Nyanda Elias Ntinginya has made his way from a small village near the Victoria Lake to the top of the renowned Mbeya Medical Research Center (MMRC) which is part of the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR) in Tanzania. On his way, Ntinginya has been supported by his parents, passionate researchers and doctors in Tanzania and Germany – and by DAAD's programme "exceed - Higher Edcucation Excellence in Development Cooperation".

Dr. Ntinginya, after completing your PhD at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) in Munich in early 2017 you have returned to the <u>Mbeya Medical Research Center</u> [http://www.mmrp.org/] as its acting director. What are the main goals of the center?

Nyanda Elias Ntinginya: One of our most important goals is to continue to conduct research especially in the field of infectious diseases, for the benefit of our communities in Tanzania, but also to help people all over the world. Hence it is very important that we build the capacities for conducting this kind of research. Therefore, we are investing in local human resource development and the infrastructure of our center. As per the mandate of the National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR), we want to deliver evidence-based information in the fight against diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and others that are a national and global priority. That's what we live for.

Before you became the center's acting director, you were heading the tuberculosis department. When was your very first contact with the center?

During my medical studies, I had the chance to do an internship at the Mbeya Zonal Referral Hospital where the MMRC is located. For the first time, I had the chance to work with my predecessor, the MMRC's longtime director Dr. Leonard Maboko. He and Professor Michael Hölscher from the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich supported me strongly since 2008 when I joined the center. The LMU had founded the MMRC together with the Mbeya Zonal Referral Hospital and the Mbeya Regional Medical Office back in 1996. In 2013 I took the lead of the tuberculosis department. I was the first Tanzanian to lead the department following the transition period from when the Germans were handling responsibilities to a Tanzanian lead. Research has always fascinated me. I wanted to be where the answers to diseases come from as a majority of diseases are preventable if appropriate tools are made available to those most in need.



Florian Peljak

Nyanda Elias Ntinginya: "My teacher said: 'You have to give the boy an opportunity.'"

You are a son of farmers. What were your first steps towards a scientific career?

When I was in primary school, one of my sisters died because of malaria. In remembrance of my sister, I wanted to understand infectious diseases and ways of healing them. There have been a lot people who encouraged and supported me, starting with my parents. My father even sold one of our few cows to finance my secondary school fees. I was the first member of my family to attend secondary school. During my primary education, a teacher had convinced my parents of investing in my education. He believed in my talent and said, 'You have to give the boy an opportunity.' I have always worked hard, and, as one of the best pupils of my high school class, I gained a grant from the Tanzanian government to study medicine at the University of Dar es Salaam. At university, a number of professors and lecturers encouraged me to pursue a scientific career.

You earned your PhD at the LMU's <u>Center for International Health (CIH)</u> [http://www.international-health.uni-muenchen.de/index.html]. How did your time at the CIH influence your scientific career?

Thanks to the CIH's funding by DAAD's exceed programme [https://www.daad.de/derdaad/unsereaufgaben/entwicklungszusammenarbeit/foerderprogramme/hochschulen/infos/en/43947higher-education-excellence-in-development-cooperation-exceed/] I was able to do my PhD studies in Munich. The PhD has been decisive for me to continue my scientific career in Tanzania. During the whole process, I have gained not only scientific experience, but also organisational and intercultural competences. At the CIH I had the great opportunity to cooperate with a lot of internationally renowned scientists. International cooperation is key for our work at the Mbeya Medical Research Center. There has always been a close exchange between German and Tanzanian researchers at the center, but we have a lot of other international partners, like, for example, the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research (WRAIR)/US Military HIV Research Program, the University of St Andrews in the UK, the Radboud university medical center in The Netherlands, The Aurum Institute in South Africa, the Medical Research Council Gambia, as well as many other collaborators.

What are your plans for the future at the Mbeya Medical Research Center?

Sustainable international exchange and cooperation is top of our agenda. This way, we can continue adding value to our country, but also to the world in terms of science and research. We want to continue mobilising resources so that we can effectively implement our ideas. That includes making resources for research available through attracting more grants for international exchange and cooperation. Regarding capacity building, our center has just recently bought a piece of land to build a college on. So, for the students who cannot afford to go abroad, there's another chance to get a diploma. We are located close to the borders to Malawi, Zambia and the DR Congo, so not only Tanzanian students could profit from this initiative.

Interview: Johannes Göbel (27 October 2017)

ADDITIONAL LINK