

The woman in the arena: Dr. Chemtai Mungo's lifesaving work in Kenya



Dr. Chemtai Mungo's story is one of inequality as both a challenge and an inspiration. She grew up in the small town of Kitale in rural Kenya. Her grandfather had 6 wives, offering an intimate portrait of the culture's patriarchal norms. Her father was the first in his village to finish primary and high school. She describes herself as a "sensitive child" who soaked in her surroundings and knew she wanted to do something to give back to her community. Her persistence and passion brought her to her current work as an ob-gyn and UC Global Health Institute GloCal and UCSF Traineeship for AIDS Prevention Studies fellow.

Dr. Mungo saw the way the weak health system in Kenya put a disproportionate burden on women, compounded by poverty and gender norms. She saw her aunt lose multiple pregnancies close to term, tragedies that likely could have been prevented in a place with access to emergency obstetrics. "In a society where childbirth is how women are valued, that has big implications," she says. Now, she's committed to tackling the public health effects of gender inequality and taking on one of the most urgent threats to women's health in Kenya.

Dr. Mungo is working with Family AIDS Care and Education Services (FACES), a

collaboration between the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI), to do groundbreaking research to end the scourge of cervical cancer, the leading cause of cancer-related deaths for women in sub-Saharan Africa. Nine out of ten women who die from cervical cancer live in low-income countries. The risk of cervical cancer is intertwined with the HIV epidemic, as women with compromised immune systems are more susceptible. While cervical cancer is preventable through vaccination and screening, it is estimated that only 3-5% of women in Kenya have ever been screened. The thousands of women who get it tend to die slow, painful deaths because the cancer isn't caught until the late stages. Dr. Mungo remembers her mother telling her she could hear her neighbor's cries of pain when she had late stage cervical cancer and no access to palliative care.

There are a lot of barriers to getting screened?it involves a pelvic exam, a pathologist on staff and multiple visits to a clinic, all difficult in an area with few resources. Dr. Mungo is working with health workers and nurses to roll out testing that allows women to collect their own samples. Not only is the screening process faster, they've gotten a strong response from women who prefer the option of doing the collection in the privacy of their own homes. The next step is expanding this model of testing county- and eventually country-wide. She's also continuing to explore new, innovative models like a screening test that include taking a picture of the cervix and using an algorithm to recognize abnormalities.

She sees her work in the context of holistic change on the African continent to improve women's health, prioritizing health as a human right and getting more women in leadership positions to advocate at the highest levels of government. As a physician and researcher born and raised in Africa, she wants to use her language, cultural skills, and medical training to be part of the solution and move the needle positively for women in Kenya. Dr. Mungo, who graduated from UCSF medical school with Distinction in Clinical and Translational research, and holds a Master's degree in Public Health from Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, relates her approach to Theodore Roosevelt's speech exalting those who dive in and do the work. The person who is "actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood." She says, "As a woman and a minority in the United States, it wasn't easy to get the training I have. I had to overcome significant obstacles. My parents did not go to college. I am the first doctor in my family. But I'm crazy enough to try to do something, to expend the effort and energy toward something I care deeply about, hoping to make a small contribution." Dr. Mungo's steadfast commitment to her vision and determination to manifest it ensure her contribution will be anything but small.

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