

**INAUGURAL ADDRESS OF DR. MARGARET MUNGHERERA,
PRESIDENT OF THE WORLD MEDICAL ASSOCIATION –
FORTALEZA, BRAZIL, 18TH OCTOBER, 2013**

The Health Secretary of the State of Ceara, Mr. Secretary Ciro Ferreira Gomes, the Hon. Minister of Health, Uganda, Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda, the outgoing President of the World Medical Association Dr. Cecil Wilson, the Chair of WMA Council, Dr. Mukesh Haikerwal, the WMA Secretary General, Dr. Otmer Kloiber, the President of the Brazilian Medical Association, Dr. Florentino Cardoso, members of the WMA, ladies and gentlemen.

It is my honour and privilege to express my sincere appreciation to the President of the Brazilian Medical Association, Dr. Florentino Cardoso and his team for hosting the WMA meeting and their warm hospitality and for the choice for such an auspicious venue for the meeting. Please join me in acknowledging the hard work put in by the Secretariat (Sunny, Lamine, Anna and others) ably led by the WMA Secretary General, Dr. Otmar Kloiber in organizing the meeting.

In a special way, I would like to thank Dr. Cecil Wilson for having graciously mentored me a lot over the last 12 months about what it means to be passionate and dedicated to getting things done and he has indeed achieved things done. Thank you, Cecil and I wish you all the best.

Some of you might be asking yourselves but who I am and where I come from.

I come from Uganda, a small country in the eastern part of Africa named which Sir Winston Churchill in 1903 described as the “the pearl of Africa” The weather, the climate, the evergreen scenery, the source of the River Nile and the world’s largest population of mountain gorillas

make Uganda an exquisitely beautiful country and you are all invited to visit it.

This country which at one time had the best medical school in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa is just beginning to recover from more than 25 years of state inspired violence and civil conflict. It is now heartening to note that it is making progress and we are on the right track.

I have lived in that country all my life not because I had no choice but because I made a conscious decision to stay and make my own contribution to making things right especially in the medical profession.

When I qualified from the medical school, I continued to witness the deterioration in health services. I had spent the whole of my third and fourth years in abject fear for my life and that of my family and friends. For 2 whole years, reading at night was difficult because that was when the gun shots and bombing was worst. Getting to the teaching hospital in the mornings for lectures to find that yet another doctor had been killed on his way from the hospital became the order of the day. I still remember the helplessness I felt as I saw many of my lecturers flee the country and into exile. The question on our minds as students was, would we be able to complete medical school. By the time, our final year ended, Idi Amin, the former president, had fled the country but leaving the country in disarray. Internship was even worse. The scarcity of resources was gross. I spent the whole of my internship putting up IV lines without gloves and draining abscesses of fully conscious patients without a local anaesthetic. And this is when I promised myself that I would do everything I could to be part of the change and I am glad to say that I have been part of it and continue to be. As we completed our internship in 1983, out of a class of almost 100, more than 60 of my classmates left the country in search of greener pastures. But despite pleas from parents, I chose to stay.

This resolve and determination enabled me to be one of the founder members of the Association of Uganda Women Medical Doctors who embarked on speaking out on the need for rural women to be able to access reproductive health services. It is this resolve and determination that led me accept to stand for the post of President of the Uganda Medical Association and become the first woman to hold that position since its formation in 1964. I would like to thank Richard, my husband, for being there for me all the time.

In a country of 36 million people, I am one of 5000 medical doctors, one of the 36 psychiatrists and one of the only 2 forensic psychiatrists the country has. But things are slowly getting better – One of the highlights of my time as President of Uganda Medical Association was when I reluctantly took up that position again in 2010 to fight for better pay for doctors and finally convinced Government to accept our proposal to increase the pay of doctors working in rural areas by 300 percent. It showed me that the decision I made 30 years ago to stay in Uganda was indeed a good decision.

It has been a long journey but it has been worth it. I have tried to take the knowledge and skills I acquired during my training as a doctor and psychiatrist beyond the hospitals and use it to reduce the suffering of poor communities, I have sat in a grass thatched hut with mud and wattle walls with no lunch for days running mental health clinics for Sudanese refugees and internally displaced persons in Northern Uganda, in the scorching heat with bombing and sporadic gun shots as the background music.

I have demonstrated on the streets for psychosocial support for survivors of gender based violence and I have had heated arguments with the tobacco industry on national radios. I am a human rights advocate and a

women's rights advocate. It is this passion and determination to fight for social justice for all that I bring to the leadership of the WMA.

It gives me great pride to note that despite the differing environments and circumstances of its members, the WMA remains committed to providing guidance to national medical association as regards promoting their professional freedom, high medical ethical standards and professional conduct, and advocacy for access to quality health care for all.

During my term as President of the World Medical Association, I will advocate for the health of the poor and vulnerable communities. Almost half of the world lives on less than a dollar a day. Therefore we, the Physicians of the world, through our national medical associations have a duty to advocate on behalf of the poor among us – because as the famous adage goes “If you miss the poor, you’ve missed the point”. And there is no part of the globe that does not have poor people who for one reason or another cannot enjoy their basic human rights- the people who cannot access health care, mentally ill people who are discriminated against, and survivors of torture and other forms of violence. As physicians, we have been given the privilege to do something about it. We can do much as individual physicians, but we can have wider and more sustainable impact within our NMAs, under the umbrella of the World Medical Association.

NMAs can ensure poor people have access to health care by ensuring that health systems in their countries are functional. Universal health care or the Millennium Development Goals cannot be achieved where there is for example a gross shortage of health workers or a lack of essential medicines. What the various stakeholders in the Health Sector need is effective leadership and guidance and who better suited than NMAs to provide this leadership? However, NMAs must ensure they

have the necessary capacity to be effective and this is where the WMA comes in.

I salute you all, who strive, sometimes risking your lives to minimize the suffering of your communities, working in the aftermath of natural and man-made disasters, in places where the health facilities are less than adequate. Your dedication to maintain the highest standards in the practice of human medicine has helped save and transform the quality of life of individuals and whole communities around the world.

As I conclude I would like to thank my Minister of Health, Hon. Dr. Ruhakana Rugunda for travelling all the way to witness my installation as president.

Through him I would like to express my gratitude and that of Uganda Medical Association to the President of Uganda for his support and interest in the health profession and the health sector.

Once again I would like to thank all of you for having entrusted me with the responsibility of heading this august body for the next 12 months.

Dr. Margaret Mungherera

President, Uganda Medical Association

18th October, 2013