

VALEDICTORY SPEECH BY DR JACQUELINE KITULU, MBS, OGW

President, World Medical Association

9th October 2026

Rotterdam

Distinguished colleagues, Chair of Council, Secretary-General, members of the WMA leadership and Secretariat, presidents and representatives of our National Medical Associations, dear colleagues and friends,

As I prepare to conclude this presidency, I do so with a heart full of gratitude — and with a profound sense of privilege.

Serving as President of the World Medical Association has been one of the highest honours of my professional life.

To have been the first Kenyan, and only the second African woman, to serve in this office has been deeply humbling. I am grateful to God for placing me in this space, for the favour He has shown me throughout this journey, and for giving me the strength and wisdom to serve.

But I have also understood from the beginning that this was never simply about me. I was entrusted with representing the collective voice of the medical profession — a profession that, across borders, cultures and health systems, shares a common commitment: to place the wellbeing and dignity of patients at the centre of what we do.

When I began this presidency, I carried three convictions with me: that our regions must speak to one another more deliberately; that we must invest intentionally in the next generation of physicians and health professionals; and that primary healthcare must remain at the heart of our pursuit of universal health coverage.

These were not simply themes for a year. They were commitments.

On interregional collaboration, I was particularly proud to see the Coalition of African National Medical Associations — CANMA — take a significant step forward.

After more than a decade of work, we held the inaugural African Leadership Conference in Livingstone, Zambia, and strengthened CANMA as a platform through which African National Medical Associations can work together and engage more effectively within the WMA.

We began with 14 countries, but the ambition is all 54 African countries.

For me, this is about much more than numbers. It is about ensuring that Africa's experience, expertise and priorities are part of the global conversation on medical ethics, professional standards and health policy, while strengthening collaboration with the other WMA regions.

On mentorship, I am equally proud of the structured mentorship programme developed with the Kenya Medical Association, extending the opportunity beyond junior doctors to young health professionals more broadly. Through the WMA Junior Doctors Network, young colleagues have also gained opportunities for global exposure, engagement and leadership.

We must never forget that the leaders of tomorrow are sitting among us today.

Our responsibility is not simply to hand them positions. It is to prepare them, open doors for them, and give them the confidence to walk through those doors.

And then there is primary healthcare.

Throughout this year, wherever I have travelled, I have continued to make the case that strong primary healthcare is the foundation of resilient health systems and universal health coverage.

Technology will transform medicine. Artificial intelligence will change how we work. But none of these advances can replace the fundamental relationship between a patient and a trusted health professional, nor compensate for health systems that fail at the first point of care.

We must continue to invest in primary healthcare, in our health workforce, and in systems that allow health professionals to provide safe, ethical and compassionate care.

Another issue close to my heart has been women in medicine and leadership.

Representation does not happen by accident. It requires intentionality — from our National Medical Associations, our regional structures and the WMA itself.

If only six of the 76 previous WMA Presidents have been women, then we have to ask ourselves what more we can do to ensure that talented women have the opportunity to lead.

Diversity of leadership strengthens our institutions and broadens the perspectives from which we address the challenges facing medicine.

And as I look ahead, I believe the WMA has an important responsibility in an increasingly complex world.

We face profound health workforce shortages and migration, financial pressures on health systems, rapid advances in artificial intelligence, questions around professional autonomy, widening inequities, and attacks on healthcare in situations of conflict.

These challenges demand a WMA that remains strong, independent and grounded in medical ethics.

And this brings me to medical neutrality.

Wherever conflict occurs, the principles of medical ethics must not become optional. Healthcare workers must be able to care for patients according to clinical need. Healthcare facilities must be protected. The wounded and sick must receive care without discrimination.

The WMA must continue to defend these principles consistently and without selectivity, including in relation to the devastating consequences of conflict in Gaza and elsewhere.

Our profession must remain a voice for humanity when humanity is under strain.

As I look towards the future of the WMA, I hope we will remain courageous in our ethics, connected across our regions, deliberate in developing young leaders, intentional about women in leadership, and unwavering in our commitment to primary healthcare and the dignity of every patient.

And now, as one president prepares to hand over to another, I want to warmly welcome my very worthy successor, President-Elect Dr Jung Yul Park of the Korean Medical Association.

There is something particularly meaningful about this transition: from KMA to KMA.

I have been privileged to serve as President of the WMA as a Kenyan physician and as a proud member of the Kenya Medical Association. I now have the honour of handing this responsibility to a distinguished colleague from the Korean Medical Association.

Dr Park, I wish you every success as you take up this great responsibility. You inherit an organisation with an extraordinary history, a powerful global network and an important voice in the future of medicine. I have every confidence that you will bring your own wisdom, experience and leadership to the office.

I look forward to welcoming you into this journey — and to supporting you as you begin your term. But no presidency is ever the work of one person.

Behind every public moment this year was a village of people who carried me, encouraged me, prayed for me and made it possible for me to keep going.

To my husband, Muema — my best friend, my number one supporter and my constant source of encouragement — thank you. To Lee and Mumo, and to our entire family, thank you for sharing me with the world this year.

And to the wonderful village of family and friends who came together in Porto at my inauguration, and who have continued to surround me with love and encouragement — I am deeply grateful.

To the Kenya Medical Association, led by Immediate Past President Dr Simon Kigundu, and to Dr Elizabeth Gitau, Dr Joy Mugambi, Dr Marie-Claire Wangari and Dr Brenda Obondo — your support throughout this presidency has been immeasurable. You have carried so much behind the scenes, and I could not have done this without you.

To my colleagues at work, who have had to cope with my being away far more than usual this year — thank you for your understanding and support.

To Dr Ramin Walter Parsa-Parsi, our Secretary-General, and to the entire WMA Secretariat — thank you for your professionalism, commitment and partnership.

And to our Chair of Council, Dr Jack Resneck — thank you for your calm, reflective and wise leadership throughout this year. I have valued not only your guidance, but also your friendship and your companionship as one of my best travel buddies.

Finally, to the World Medical Association itself — thank you for trusting me.

Thank you for giving a Kenyan doctor the opportunity to stand on a global platform and speak on behalf of the medical profession.

I leave this office with gratitude, but also with conviction that the work continues.

If there is one thing I hope this presidency has demonstrated, it is that leadership is not about occupying a position.

It is about opening doors.

It is about bringing people with you.

It is about lifting others as you rise.

And it is about leaving the institution stronger than you found it.

And perhaps, somewhere in Africa, there is a young girl who will see this moment and believe that the highest rooms of global medicine are also hers to enter.

That, for me, would be a legacy worth leaving.

Thank you for the trust.

Thank you for the friendship.

And thank you for allowing me to serve.

It has been the honour of a lifetime.

Asanteni sana.