

MEMORIAL

Professor Theophilus Oladipo Ogunlesi, L.S.M., F.R.C.P., F.A.S.
(1923–2023) – The first Nigerian Professor of Medicine

By Abraham Ariyo, M.D.



Professor Theophilus Oladipo Ogunlesi was born on July 12, 1923 and died on January 19, 2023, in Sagamu, Ijebu Remo Local Government, Ogun State, Nigeria. He was 99 years old. He became the first Nigerian Professor of Medicine from 1965 until he retired in 1983. He was Professor Emeritus of Medicine from 1983 to 2023 at Nigeria's Premier Medical School, The College of Medicine, University of Ibadan. We celebrate his life this week.

Young Ogunlesi attended St. Paul's Primary School in Sagamu (1930–36) and his Secondary Education at C.M.S. Grammar School in Lagos (1936–40). He was a precocious child nicknamed 'professor' by his elementary school teacher. He distinguished himself and leapfrogged many grades because of his exceptional abilities. He entered Pre-Med at the Yaba Higher College (1941–42) and subsequently attended the historic Yaba Medical School (1942–47). He qualified as a Licentiate in Surgery and Medicine (L.S.M.), with distinction in Medicine and Public Health, in 1947. In 1948, Yaba Medical School was

abolished, and the University of Ibadan Medical School was started with official medical degrees issued by the University of London.

From 1947–49, Nigerian Hospitals did not accept L.S.M. holders as medical officers. Thus, Young Ogunlesi worked as an Assistant Medical officer, shuffling from community clinics and public health facilities, a period he described in his own words as 'turbulent years'. In 1948, during this turbulent period, a ray of hope shone through this darkness when one of the L.S.M. seniors took and passed the Conjoint Examinations in Edinburgh – the first time an African would pass this exam, opening doors for other L.S.M. candidates. Furthermore, in 1951, the same candidate took and passed the coveted membership examinations of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Edinburgh – the first African to pass any Royal College of Physician membership. This news spread like wildfire, giving renewed hope to the disenfranchised L.S.M. holders such as Ogunlesi, who were still in turbulent times.

In 1950, Young Ogunlesi also went to the United Kingdom, took the conjoint exam, and passed: a move that solidified his L.S.M. certificate and allowed him to get a job as a Medical Officer. He worked as a Medical Officer and Specialist Physician in the then Western and Northern Regions from 1950 to 1956. He went for his postgraduate medical education at the Postgraduate Medical School of the University of London (1956–1957) and the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, USA (1967–1968). Professor Ogunlesi passed his membership of the Royal College of Physician of England and the Royal College of Edinburgh in 1958. He became a Fellow of the Edinburgh College in 1962 and of the London College (first Nigerian) in 1970. He was awarded the Rockefeller Travelling Fellowship in 1963, WHO Research Fellowship in Cardiology, University of Minnesota, USA in 1968, and the Ford Foundation Travelling Fellowship to India, Pakistan and the Far East in 1971.

On arrival in Nigeria, he was given a job as a medical specialist at Adeoyo Hospital: a teaching affiliate of the new University of Ibadan Medical School in 1961. He became an Associate Professor in 1962, and a full Professor in 1965, and an honorary consultant physician at the University College Hospital, Ibadan in 1961. He was the Head of Department of Medicine from 1969

to 1972. After his retirement in 1983, he was appointed Emeritus Professor of Medicine in 1986.

One of his lasting achievements was his work with the late Professor Alexander Brown, the founding Head of Department of Medicine at the University College Hospital, Ibadan. They co-founded the Ibarapa Community and Primary Health Care Programme, with initial funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, in 1963. The Ibarapa Project was a collaborative and cooperative health development project of the University of Ibadan, the Western Nigeria Government, and the Ibarapa community. The Rockefeller Foundation provided initial funding, and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene provided technical support to medical staff. The objectives of the project was to teach medical students and doctors, through practical work, the principles and practice of community medicine, and to develop a model of community health care delivery in a rural setting of integrated health care system, which was transferable to other developing countries. Professor Ogunlesi excelled at the Director of the Ibarapa Project working with the late Professor Sir Hugh Parry, KCMG OBE.

An article in the *Lancet* in 1965 described the Ibarapa Project 'as a major breakthrough in medical teaching in Africa and praised the far-seeing Faculty (of Medicine) in Ibadan' for making a move, which could well provide a pattern for future medical training throughout the developing world. Several generations of Ibadan medical students greatly benefitted from the 8-week Igbo-Ora community posting, often a highlight of the medical training. This has now been extended to include student nurses, midwives, dentists, and hygienists. The programme, now in its 60th year, has collected 60 years of medical records of patients in a rural community and over 40 years of interdisciplinary data. It hosts internship for master's and diploma students from the African Regional Health Education Centre, University of Ibadan, and welcomes elective students from the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Professor Ogunlesi served in many other capacities in matters related to health, education and research, some

of which include the following. He was advisor to the Federal Government of Nigeria on Medical Education (1980–1983); First President of the National Postgraduate College of Nigeria (1980–1984); Member, National Implementation Committee for the health sector of the 3rd National Development plan of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1975–1979); Member, Management Board of the University College Hospital, Ibadan (1969–1972); and Member (representing the University of Ibadan Medical School) in the Nigeria Medical Council (1975–1979). He was also Member, Governing Council, University of Nigeria, Nsukka 1984; Special Member (medical expert/adviser), Ibarapa Local Government Council (1972–1975).

He was an active member of many professional societies. He was the Past President, Association of Physicians of Nigeria; former National Vice-President and State Chairman, Nigeria Medical Association; and Member, Nigeria Medical Council (1975–1979); Member, UCH Board of Management (1966–1972); Member, Nigeria Cardiac Society; Secretary for Nigeria Royal Society for Tropical Medicine and Hygiene since 1965; Member, International Society for Hypertension; and Member, WHO Scientific Advisory Committee on Cardiovascular Diseases (1969–1972). He authored and co-authored many papers and articles on various aspects of General Medicine, Health Care Systems and Medical Education in both local and international journals.

As Emeritus Professor, he gave a tutorial to our class in 1985 as new clinical students at U.C.H. My classmates still remember him drawing a futuristic map on the blackboard, which looked like the current electronic medical records of 2023. He was smart, with a brilliant mind and longitudinal foresight.

He was a great clinician, an astute scientist, a doctor of doctors, and a teacher of teachers.

May the Good Lord continue to rest his soul. Amen.

Abraham A. Ariyo, MD, MPH, FACC.

Director, HeartMasters Cardiology,
Interventional Cardiologist, Baylor Scott & White Medical Center.