

## Tribute to Professor Angela Aneneolisa Okolo -Where knowledge met compassion: The doyen's legacy in newborn survival

An entire lecture would be insufficient to fully delve into the contributions of Professor Angela Okolo to newborn care. She was there very early at the University of Benin Teaching Hospital, when Neonatology was not a favourite field. People preferred to stay away from those tiny babies and their troubles. So they were more than willing to relinquish newborn care to anyone who showed an interest. And Angela Okolo showed deep interest.

For many years, she carried the burden of newborn care in Benin. She defined newborn care in Benin. And to a large extent newborn care represented the best of newborn care in Nigeria. In addition to rendering unparalleled selfless and compassionate service, she was actively involved in teaching undergraduates and postgraduates, as well as in quality research work. Many of us who parade ourselves today in the Neonatology family are products of that training directly and indirectly. At some point in her career, she exported her services to the University of Jos and its affiliate teaching hospital before returning to base in Benin. It is on record that Angela Anene Okolo was the first Nigeria woman to reach the exalted position of Professor of Paediatrics and for a very long time, the only one in Neonatology.

Upon retiring from UNIBEN/UBTH, she got contracted to the Federal Medical Centre, Asaba. And here, she proved that she had so much more to give – promotion of community-based care, promotion of community-based research, development of a first grade Neonatal Services. FMC Asaba was the second training institution to be granted full accreditation for post-graduate training in the neonatology subspecialty. All thanks to Professor Okolo who led the effort to equip the centre with enviable state-of-the-art facilities.

### Personal lessons from Professor Okolo

- I learnt a number of things from her that I would love to place on record:
- Transform your work into your research
- Do not throw away the smallest scrap of paper until the research work is published
- No emergency displaces another that you are already handling. Call for help
- Hold counselling sessions with relations – the more ill, the more urgent
- Research directions

Professor Okolo always had a basket full of research ideas. She was always rich in ideas about how to improve a research design. The long trail of supervisees and mentees can freely testify to that. In the later stages of her career, she developed a special interest in community-based work and research. As former Chief examiner and now, Faculty Chair, I can testify that most trainees shy away from community-based research but not Professor Okolo. Her interest stemmed from something with which many of us are still trying to come to grips. The real issues are in the communities. Waiting at the hospital is to delay understanding and intervention.

### Service to Postgraduate Medical Colleges

Professor Angela Okolo was a trainer without equal. I will let medical students and residents who passed through her do the witnessing. By the way, I am an alumnus of her school. At institutional level, she busied herself with developing curricula as well as improving examination and



Professor Angela Aneneolisa Okolo  
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evaluation techniques. The Neonatology training curricula of the National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria and that of the West African College of Physicians were developed under her chairmanship. It is pertinent to mention that she was the second longest serving Secretary of the Faculty of Paediatrics of the National Postgraduate College. During the crisis years when senior teachers left Nigeria to seek better fortunes abroad, she stayed back as a stabilising force in the Faculty, working with three consecutive Chairmen. It was also during those heady days that she was Chief Examiner of Paediatrics in the West African College of Physicians. It is only fitting that she was awarded a Gold medal of service by the West African College of Physicians and was recognised as a Distinguished Paediatrician by the Paediatric Association of Nigeria.

### Professional associations

She led the Nigerian Society of Neonatal Medicine in its formative years and injected the genes necessary for its survival. The Union of National African Paediatric Societies and Associations once experienced from her services as a bilingual Secretary-General. Actually, bilingual does not completely describe her because she spoke Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, English and French.

### Peroration

Professor Angela Okolo did not only do her job, she did it with passion and compassion. She disposed herself to every newborn at risk and to their families. She boosted the hopes and aspirations of her students and mentees. Today, many are fascinated by the concept of family-based care but Professor Okolo had been practising it for many years. Carrying mothers along had long been her forte. She led a devout Catholic life – a Lady of the St. Mulumba Order. She participated in charity activities of a wide variety.

We mourn her extremely sudden passing – because she remained very active until the end, having just returned from a Paediatric conference in Abeokuta. All who attended that conference were truly shocked because, as usual, she was the life of the party.

We shall miss her a lot.

We shall fondly and reverently remember her forever.

May her memory be a blessing to us all.

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