



OBSERVATIONS

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Agnes Binagwaho: Humour, hope, and global health



[Image: Duncan Smith]

Biography

Agnes Binagwaho is a Rwandan paediatrician with a mission to transform healthcare in the country of her birth. Brought up and trained in Belgium after her parents left Rwanda when she was 3, she returned in 1996, just two years after civil war and the mass slaughter of the Tutsi people had left Rwanda devastated. Her life has since been dedicated to improving health quality and access—first in HIV and then at Rwanda's Ministry of Health, where she served as permanent secretary and then as minister of health, from 2011 to 2016. She is now vice chancellor of the University of Global Health Equity in Kigali, which she cofounded. Through health sciences education she now hopes to have a global impact on health.

What was your earliest ambition?

Since I was a little girl I wanted to contribute to the alleviation of suffering.

What was your best career move?

Two were equally important: the first was moving from France to Rwanda after the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi and deciding to stay and fight for vulnerable people. The second was accepting the offer to join a managerial team, which meant transitioning away from full time direct clinical work that involved serving one patient at a time. Over time, this decision allowed me to serve millions in my country who needed lifesaving drugs and to contribute to rebuilding a health system to care for them in the long run.

What was the worst mistake in your career?

Not tackling malnutrition correctly or early enough. It's a persistent challenge, and much work is still needed to help children affected by this preventable condition.

How is your work-life balance?

I prioritise working for people in need and finding joy in the long hours, by surrounding myself with experts and colleagues who approach this work as I do: with humour and hope.

How do you keep fit and healthy?

I wear my dancing shoes, and I hope to dance more every day.

What single change would you like to see made to the NHS?

It should do more to avoid unnecessarily long admissions by improving the link between hospitals and communities, such as developing a robust plan for community health workers to provide clinical and social services for people where they live.

What do you wish that you had known when you were younger?

To enjoy every moment.

Do doctors get paid enough?

Not in the developing world—and there's even less of an incentive for doctors to provide care for rural poor people, as it's so weakly compensated worldwide.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

Anyone I failed to convince to invest time and effort in human development.

What do you usually wear to work?

Something that inspires me each day and is comfortable and colourful.

Which living doctor do you most admire, and why?

Paul Farmer, for his deep commitment to repair the broken world, his dedication to vulnerable people, and his compassion, humility, and friendship.

What is the worst job you have done?

Each job has been a learning opportunity and a blessing.

What unheralded change has made the most difference in your field?

Increased awareness of the need for global solidarity to prioritise the prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, with critical support provided through the Global Fund and Gavi (the Vaccine Alliance).

What new technology or development are you most looking forward to?

Innovations that enhance skill transfer and e-learning.

What book should every doctor read?

Reimagining Global Health by Paul Farmer, Arthur Kleinman, Jim Kim, and Matthew Basilico (see: <https://www.pih.org/article/pih-co-founders-release-new-book-on-global-health>).

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

Good food.

Where are or when were you happiest?

As a medical student, with all of those great memories formed during a time of growth and learning in my life.

What television programmes do you like?

Anything related to history and scientific discovery.

What personal ambition do you still have?

To create a sustainable, lasting university devoted to promoting global health equity.

Summarise your personality in three words

Innovator, builder, fighter for equity.

What is your pet hate?

People who fail to imagine that change is possible.

What would be on the menu for your last supper?

Chicons au gratin.

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like at your funeral?

“Le Moribond” by Jacques Brel.

Is the thought of retirement a dream or a nightmare?

I’m living my retirement plan by working each day for things I believe in—and I love it.

If you weren’t in your present position what would you be doing instead?

Taking care of little ones, through my role as a paediatrician.