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Helping patients get their lives back: the colorectal surgeon

Tayo Oke talks to **Kathy Oxtoby** about why her chosen specialty of colorectal surgery is her “natural home” and the rewards of developing strong bonds with patients

Kathy Oxtoby

At the age of 6 Tayo Oke decided she wanted to become a surgeon—to satisfy her curiosity about what really happens in an operating theatre. “Whenever I’d see one of the *Doctor in the House* films and there was an operation, I’d always wonder what was happening to the person under the surgical drape. I wanted to know what the doctor was actually doing. And I was curious about what human insides looked like,” she recalls.

That curiosity drove her towards a career in colorectal surgery—a specialty she describes as “my natural home.”

“During my training I considered all the surgical subspecialties, but colorectal surgery was where I felt I could make the most difference—for example, doing colon cancer surgery,” says Oke, a consultant general and colorectal surgeon at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Woolwich, part of Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust.

Oke enjoys the anatomical aspects of surgery—“putting bits of bowel together.” And she also appreciates how the specialty allows her to operate alongside other surgical colleagues, such as gynaecologists or urologists.

She finds the “strong bond” that she develops with patients extremely rewarding. “When someone is really unwell their life comes to a standstill. Some patients have been carrying their ailments with them a long time, and have been unable really to talk about them. So you need to build trust. It’s an absolute privilege to be entrusted with the welfare of another human being, and to be part of a team that will hopefully get a patient back to full health again.”

That bond with patients “is unique, and it stays with you forever,” she says. “During the pandemic, I received phone calls from concerned former patients wanting to know I was okay. Patients send me thank you cards. All of this spurs you on and encourages you,” she says.

Born in London, Oke trained at University College Hospital, Ibadan, Nigeria, where her family was originally from. She returned to the UK in 1989, passed her Professional and Linguistic Assessments Board test and did various surgical senior house officer jobs. During her training she worked for some inspiring female surgeons. “Consultant surgeon Anne Davis was my first mentor and role model. She encouraged me and saw me through dark days when life was difficult. I learnt a lot from her.”

Jean McDonald “was the first black female surgeon I’d ever met, and she had a massive impact on me,” says Oke. “She kept me going, told me to believe in

myself, and said as long as I did the work and knew what I was doing, I would eventually get to where I wanted to be in my career.”

During her higher surgical training, Oke was also inspired by colorectal surgeon Christine Hall. “She was a teacher who took an interest in your welfare and gave you courage.”

Since being appointed to her first—and current—consultant role in 2001, she has tried to give that same level of support and encouragement to trainees. “I aim to create a pleasant environment for trainees to learn in, and to become competent surgeons. It’s important to be empathetic and sympathetic, to talk through any problems, and to give your full support.”

As for Oke’s career ambitions, she intends to stay on the “front line” of healthcare, rather than diversifying into other clinical or management roles, preferring to “take on complex cases.”

“It’s a wonderful feeling when I’ve been able to help these patients get their life back,” she says.

Outside of work she winds down by taking long walks while listening to music. “I get lost in my own world. My music taste is eclectic, from classical and gospel, to hip hop and smooth jazz.”

But she has no intention of winding down her career, or moving away from her love of surgery. “The beauty of colorectal surgery is that no two abdomens are the same. I’m still blindsided by some of the cases I come across. My curiosity about what’s under the surgical drapes may be satisfied. But life is still full of surprises.”

Nominated by Sala Abdalla

“I first met Ms Oke in 2015 when I worked at the trust as trainee colorectal registrar. I had chosen to work for her as she has a reputation for being an excellent trainer. My time with her was so rewarding that some years later I returned to do a second stint with her firm.

“I have been inspired by Tayo, not least because of her exceptional skills and expertise as a surgeon, but because she has taught me something extremely valuable—which is to care about patients, not to just care for them.

“In working for Tayo I have learnt that investing extra time in getting to know patients beyond their disease process enhances their experience and can improve clinical outcomes.

“I am indebted to Tayo Oke for the training, time, and dedication she has given me, and for the way she has made me feel while working with her—respected and valued.”

Sala Abdalla is a consultant general and upper gastrointestinal surgeon, Ealing Hospital, London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust.