

## **Half a century of Neurosurgery in Nigeria** *The Thirteenth E. Latunde Odeku Memorial Lecture*

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The Provost, College of Medicine and Chairman; Special Guest of Honour, the Vice-Chancellor, University of Ibadan represented by the Dean, Faculty of Clinical Sciences; Deputy Provost, College of Medicine; Deans of Faculties; Director, Institute of Neurological Sciences; Head, Department of Surgery; Heads of Departments, Chairman, Medical Advisory Committee; College Secretary; Professors; Academic & Administrative Staff, Students; Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen.

The invitation to deliver the 13<sup>th</sup> E. Latunde Odeku Memorial Lecture was a great surprise considering the distinguished personalities that delivered the previous 12 lectures. It is indeed a great honour and I thank the College of Medicine and the University of Ibadan for the privilege and opportunity.

“The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones ...” One often wonders the veracity of this famous quote from our revered Shakespeare voiced through Antony in *Julius Caesar* [1]. Latunde Odeku was the legendary African Neurosurgeon whose exemplary life we gather here today to celebrate. It is indeed a source of immense joy that the pioneering work of this great Neurosurgeon was not allowed to vanish. The Memorial Lectures have, like biography books, enabled us to re-live his life each time they have been delivered.

I suspect that many people in this audience are expecting to hear something about the dark side of Latunde Odeku as all previous lecturers had seemingly canonised him. Surely there must be a skeleton in the cupboard somewhere! Sorry, I do not have any bad stories to narrate. It is clear therefore that in this very exceptional and well deserved instance, the good that Latunde Odeku did, lives on after him and was not interred with his bones.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I cannot claim to have known the great man very well. In fact I never had the opportunity to meet him face to face. However, his great personality, humanity and magnanimity loomed large as will be exemplified in the following stories. In 1973, I applied for a neurosurgical post at the University College Hospital (UCH), Ibadan. A fatherly, rather apologetic letter from Professor Odeku explained that although the neurosurgery service needed and wanted me, the Department of Surgery said that there was no immediate vacancy. Luckily, there were favourable offers from Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) and the University of Nigeria. I opted to set up a new unit at Enugu in the war battered Eastern Nigeria.

The cruise home from the UK in the luxurious MV Aureole was a memorable and fortuitous experience in many respects. One sunny day while my family was relaxing on the deck, a gentleman approached us and introduced himself as Adelola Adeloje, Professor of Neurological Surgery at the Ibadan. He had been away on Sabbatical Leave and was returning home. The coincidence was extraordinary. We exchanged stories and information. For the first time, I had firsthand information about this giant of Nigeria neurosurgery – E. Latunde Odeku. He was no longer a name and a signature in a letter but a real person.

As I embarked on the unenviable task of starting a neurosurgical service in Enugu at the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital (UNTH) early in 1974, an unanticipated and unsolicited for help came from Odeku. He must have learnt that I was back to Enugu as he promptly sent to me a parcel containing most of the publications in neurosciences that emanated from Nigeria in addition to a letter of encouragement. He was already very ill as I later on came to realise and a few months later, the news of his death reached us. Professor Odeku returned to Nigeria in 1962, about six months after I had left the shores of Nigeria for University education abroad. He died a few months after

I returned as a neurosurgeon! Although I was not lucky enough to set eyes on this great man, his actions, spoke louder than words. His magnanimous gesture will remain evergreen in my memory.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, it is clear from this account that if I give a biographical account of E. Latunde Odeku it will lack authenticity. Besides, I am aware that many preceding renowned lecturers [2-10] had done justice to this. Adeloye had also published Odeku's biography [11]. Clearly, I do not have to repeat the story and risk boring this audience.

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