

OBITUARY

Professor Welani Chilengwe: The passing of a damn good surgeon



There are surgeons, and then there are surgeons.

There are those who learn anatomy, master the instruments, cut with confidence, tie knots with speed, and walk out of theatre pleased that the operation has gone according to plan.

And then there are those rare men and women whose presence in a theatre does more than complete an

operation. It steadies the room. It reassures the anaesthetist. It settles the scrub nurse. It teaches the assistant. It gives courage to the patient, even before the first incision is made.

Professor Welani Chilengwe belonged firmly to that second category. He was, in the fullest, richest, and most affectionate sense of the phrase, a damn good surgeon.

Born on 10 April 1964 at Ndola Central Hospital, Professor Chilengwe was the son of Mr. Tryson Chilengwe and Mrs. Tiwakomole Zimba Chilengwe. He hailed from Lundazi and was proudly Tumbuka. From those roots came a man of discipline, dignity, humour, resilience, and a deep sense of duty. Those who knew him well will remember that he carried his origins not as a badge to impress others, but as a quiet compass that kept him grounded.

His early education took him through Chindwin, Kamfinsa, and Chiwempela primary schools before he proceeded to secondary education, at Chikola Secondary School in Chingola, and later to the University of Zambia. At UNZA, he obtained a Bachelor of Science in Human Biology in 1988, followed by the Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery in 1991. His love for surgery soon became unmistakable. He went on to obtain the Master of Medicine in Surgery in 1999, with research work on skeletal traction in Zambia. Later, in 2004, he strengthened his public health and leadership credentials with training in Management in International Public Health in Atlanta, USA.

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But to list his degrees alone would be to miss the man. Welani was never merely collecting qualifications. He was preparing himself for service.

His career began at Ndola Central Hospital as a Junior Resident Medical Officer between 1991 and 1992. He then served in the Zambia Army medical services, including as Battalion Medical Officer at Kaoma Barracks. His surgical skill and courage would later take him beyond Zambia's borders. He served with the United Nations Zambia Battalion in Rwanda in 1994 and later in Sierra Leone in 2000, including as Chief Surgeon at a UN referral hospital. These were not postings for the faint-hearted. They demanded composure under pressure, judgement under uncertainty, and humanity in the midst of human suffering. Welani had all three.

In the Zambian health system, he rose through demanding roles that required both clinical competence and administrative maturity. He served as Consultant Surgeon and Head Clinical Care at Ndola Central Hospital, Medical Superintendent at Ronald Ross Hospital, Senior Medical Superintendent at Ndola Central Hospital, Executive Director and Senior Medical Superintendent at Chainama Hills College Hospital, Director of Mobile and Emergency Health Services at the Ministry of Health, and later Director of Clinical Care and Diagnostic Services at Ministry of Health Headquarters.

These titles tell the story of a man trusted with responsibility. But those of us who worked with him know that his real authority did not come from the office he occupied. It came from the way he carried himself.

Professor Chilengwe was calm without being passive. Firm without being cruel. Funny without being careless. Serious without being pompous. He had that rare gift of making a difficult matter feel manageable, not because he underestimated it, but because he had already thought through it. He was the sort of surgeon who did not enter theatre hoping that things would work out. He entered theatre having already considered what could go wrong.

That is the mark of a damn good surgeon.

A damn good surgeon is not defined by technical brilliance alone. Yes, Welani had good hands. He understood tissue. He respected anatomy. He knew when to move quickly and when to slow down. But what made him exceptional was the larger combination: sound judgement, preparation, discipline, humility, humour, compassion, and respect for the team.

He knew that surgery begins long before the incision. It begins with listening to the patient, examining properly, reviewing the investigations, planning the operation, preparing the team, and being honest about risk. He understood that a surgeon must know when to operate, when not to operate, when to stop, and when to ask for help. These are simple truths, but only mature surgeons live by them.

Welani also understood that the theatre is not a one-man kingdom. He respected nurses, anaesthetists, assistants, technicians, cleaners, porters, and recovery staff. He knew that safe surgery depends on the whole team. He could lead the room without humiliating people. He could correct without destroying confidence. He could teach without making the junior feel small. In a profession where ego sometimes masquerades as excellence, that humility was one of his greatest strengths.

And then there was the laughter.

To remember Professor Chilengwe only in solemn tones would be inaccurate. He was too alive for that. He had warmth. He had wit. He had presence. He could bring lightness into a heavy day and common sense into an overcomplicated argument. He had a way of cutting through noise, both in conversation and in clinical decision-making. He could be direct, sometimes disarmingly so, but rarely without purpose. Behind the humour was a disciplined mind; behind the teasing was affection; behind the firmness was care.

His contribution to medical education was immense. At Cavendish University Zambia, which he joined in 2016, he served as lecturer, Senior Lecturer,

Assistant Dean, Dean of the School of Medicine, and ultimately Vice Chancellor from 2020 until his passing. He taught General Surgery, Clinical Methods and Skills, and Healthcare Ethics. In doing so, he helped shape not only the knowledge of future doctors, but their character. This mattered deeply to him. He knew that Zambia did not simply need more doctors. It needed better doctors. It needed clinicians with judgement, honesty, compassion, and discipline. It needed surgeons who understood that the patient is not “the appendix,” “the fracture,” “the thyroid,” or “the abdomen in bed six,” but a human being with fears, a family, a story, and a future.

Professor Chilengwe belonged to several professional bodies, including the Surgical Society of Zambia, the Zambia Medical Association, and the Zambia General Surgeons Association. He was a Fellow of the College of Surgeons of East, Central and Southern Africa and a Fellow of the Zambia College of Medicine and Surgery. His interests extended to thyroid disease, rural access to healthcare, unmet surgical needs, quality improvement, 5S, KAIZEN, and Total Quality Management. He also contributed to scholarship, including work on whether medicine could be taught online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, beyond the academy, the hospital, the Ministry, the operating theatre, and the conference room, there was another side of Welani that deserves equal honour. He believed in lifting others. One of the clearest expressions of this was his charitable work in building a school for underprivileged children. That act speaks volumes. It tells us that he saw education not as a privilege to be admired from a distance, but as a door that must be opened for others.

In his family life, Professor Chilengwe was husband to Mrs. Peggy Chiyokoma Chilengwe, father to Dr. Tiwamukolole Chilengwe and Chipso Chilengwe, and grandfather to two grandchildren. To the public, he was Professor, Surgeon, Vice Chancellor,

Director, Fellow, and leader. To his family, he was much more: husband, father, grandfather, counsellor, protector, and source of strength.

On 13 April 2026, after an illness, Professor Welani Chilengwe passed on. The loss is painful. It is painful to his family, his friends, his students, his colleagues, his patients, and the many institutions he served. It is painful to Zambian surgery. It is painful to medical education. It is painful to all of us who knew the man behind the titles.

But grief must also make room for gratitude.

We are grateful that he lived. Grateful that he served. Grateful that he taught. Grateful that he operated. Grateful that he led. Grateful that he laughed with us. Grateful that he reminded us, by example, that excellence and humanity are not opposites.

Professor Welani Chilengwe's life teaches us that a damn good surgeon is one whose patients are safer because of his skill, whose team is stronger because of his leadership, whose students are better because of his teaching, and whose profession is nobler because of his integrity.

Farewell, Welani.

You were a son of Lundazi, a proud Zambian, a soldier, a surgeon, a teacher, a leader, a husband, a father, a grandfather, and a friend.

And yes, Professor, you were a damn good surgeon.

John Kachimba
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