

Surgeon Profile Series

## Professor Kokila Lakhoo

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Professor Kokila Lakhoo is a consultant paediatric surgeon at the University of Oxford and Oxford University Hospitals (OUH) NHS Foundation trust, past President of the Global Initiative for Children's Surgery and Chair of the International Forum of the British Association of Paediatric Surgeons.

As a sixth generation South African with Indian ancestry, she grew up in a hamlet in South Africa during the apartheid era. Segregation was everywhere, reaching from the playground throughout higher education, and her conservative village was a place where most girls married at the age of sixteen, and a community that did not believe in women's education. Despite this, her family always felt that their investment would be in the education of their children – boys and girls. A lack of schools for the black population made it necessary to move away from her family at the age of nine, to Pretoria, for senior school, and later to Durban to attend the only black medical school at the time, at the University of Natal.

Prof Lakhoo was about to do her A-levels during the Soweto uprising in 1976, where children were protesting for equal education. Despite the unrest, students were always conscious that they would not compromise their education, and despite closures of schools, they continued with self-directed learning in warehouses and garages opened by the community. They knew that without an education they would struggle, and it was this ethos and determination to be educated that drove them forward, and that, ultimately, changed the country. This self-directed, resilient attitude was also important in her later medical training, which began in Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg, where continued segregation of white and black doctors meant some teaching was simply not available to her. Prof Lakhoo was persistently told that as a woman of colour there was no place for her in a surgical career. She continually had to persist and insist on her place, often at the very most being tolerated, but not accepted.

Working as a registrar, she knew she had to put in a hundred times more effort than the others, because she knew otherwise, if they were going to get rid of someone, as a black woman, it would be her. During her years as a registrar, she did a PhD concurrently with her surgical training, balancing the two by working weekends and nights in addition to her on-call shifts. Following general surgical training and her PhD, Prof Lakhoo got married, and then did her paediatric training in Cape Town. Again, this move

was catalysed by a lack of black trainers at her hospital in Johannesburg. She then did a fellowship at Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, and parts of her training in Leeds, where she later came back as a consultant in South Africa, running the surgical unit. She then was offered a job at Hammersmith Hospital to develop neonatal surgery, where spent three years. During this time, she had her two daughters. She was later offered to run the neonatal unit in Oxford, where she still works today.

Prof Lakhoo emphasises the crucial importance of always maintaining clinical skills. Trained surgeons are so pressurised to also be academics, but her view is that clinical skills must always be prioritised with research. To withstand the pressure, her research is not funded by the university, because this way she feels that her research can be done on her own time and on her own terms. When she became a consultant, demands on her time meant that she could only have two of surgery, family and academia. For her, the former two have always taken precedent. When she does do research, she always makes sure she does not compromise family time for it, often working in the early hours of the morning to achieve this. Now that her children are less dependent, she has switched her attention to her research. In addition to her clinical and academic work, her commitment to global surgery is evident by her role in setting up the paediatric surgical unit in Tanzania, her link with her alma mater in Johannesburg to support paediatric research, and her role as president of the Global Initiative for Paediatric Surgery.

Despite her numerous national and international roles, Prof Lakhoo has not lost her enthusiasm for operating. She says the best thing about her job is operating on a newborn and describes a busy weekend on-call as bliss. For aspiring surgeons, she recommends doing taster weeks to find what does this for you.

Prof Lakhoo's family was frowned upon in the village for investing in the education of their children, but she became the first person in the family who went to university, and this set a trend for the village that meant that now all children are educated. This would not have been possible without this insistence on education from her family, and her resilience and persistence in getting it. Despite the continual hurdles on the way, Prof Lakhoo is an incredibly positive person, unwilling to dwell on the miseries of the past. Her parents brought her up to view difficulties or failures as dips that are steppingstones to

something greater, and that in fact, there are no failures, just delays – one should use them to reflect and move forward. She says, no matter what the challenges are, you can do it – anybody can do it!