*Education for Health,*
*Vol. 19, No. 1, March 2006, 117–123*

THE STUDENT'S VOICE

# An Interview of Ramullah N. Kasozi

This interview was conducted on 10 October 2004, at the Network: TUFH conference in Atlanta, Georgia, USA. It was edited and abridged and consequently reviewed via e-mail.

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*How would you like to introduce yourself to our readers?*
I am Ramullah Kasozi, a second year student from Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. I like to think of myself as a professional. For example, I think that research should be meaningful. I don't think that academics should run someone's life, but that they should strike a balance. I don't think that, because I am in Medicine, I am the top of the cream, but I am just like everybody else. I like to have fun, I also love doing sports. I played football for ten years.

I have an undergraduate degree from the University of Guelph, Ontario in Canada. I have five brothers, including my baby brother who just turned 8. I love the sense of innocence he still has. I love children, because of their honesty they will say it like it is.

*How did you end up living in Canada?*
I was born in Uganda, but then we left because there was a lot of turmoil there, in the Idi Amin time. My parents thought it would not be good to raise children in that environment and so we moved about. We first moved to Sudan, then to Kenya and eventually to Canada.

*Do you remember moving?*
No, I was 2, but I recall when I was 3 or 4, you know you remember images. I remember telling my mom images. To me they were like dreams, but my mother said: no, that actually happened.

*Education for Health* ISSN 1357-6283 print/ISSN 1469-5804 online © 2006 Taylor & Francis
http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals
DOI: 10.1080/13576280500510065

*And how long have you been in Canada?*
I left there a year ago. I came to Makerere in 2003, on my return to Uganda.

*What does it feel like to be a member of those two cultures?*
First I said: it will be an interesting experience to go back. To move was fine, I experienced a kind of honeymoon stage, trying to reconnect with my roots. I did everything I had always wanted to, I visited different places. But quite soon I realized how North American I was. I live with my father, which made it a very easy transition. My mother still lives in Canada. My father was instrumental in helping me out in Uganda. I am still learning the language, which is interesting. I have a typical Ugandan name, I have typical parents, I am from a major tribe. But I am also a black sheep: how do I fit into this family? It was almost as if I didn't connect, although the people were very nice and welcoming. So now I feel Ugandan and Canadian, I wouldn't want to say that I am more this compared to the other, but both cultures have affected me in some way.

*Did you choose Makerere University specifically, in Uganda?*
I finished my undergraduate studies in 2002 so I had a year to rest and reflect. I knew I wanted to go to medical school; that had always been my choice. I contemplated on different options, USA, Canada, Uganda, I wanted to keep my options open. So it was a matter of comparing the programmes.

*How did you make the choice to become a doctor?*
I remember, it must have been by grade 9, age 14 or 15, that I had a science teacher. She was the most amazing science teacher I ever had. I had always been interested in how our body acts and moves, but it was this teacher who always said: you should be a doctor. She always drew pictures of, for instance, the heart. She made science fun and medicine interesting. I had always had this image of doctors being stuffy, not very communicative, but she always made it very exciting! She just attracted me to it, I don't know what she did. And I must admit, too, you know the TV-show 'ER'? People always told me: you shouldn't watch that because it romanticizes the whole thing. Nevertheless, I also found that quite inspirational.

*And when you went to medical school, did you recognize any of that?*
With this science teacher it was easy to interact. She created an atmosphere in which you could feel free to express yourself. And now, in medical school, teachers are compassionate, patient with students. But I my undergrad period in Canada, you'd find only a few professors who took the time, most of them did not. The professors at Makerere University take the time to listen. They want to make medicine exciting and not so stressful. The TV-series ER gives a totally different context compared to Uganda. In Uganda there is not so much drama. Maybe it's just the culture, in Uganda people don't show their emotions

so much. I remember we got clinical exposure in our first week at medical school. You know, they threw us in. I remember there was a woman in labour, and the nursing staff were not moving about to try to treat her. She gave birth to her baby and you would think that the health care personnel would be compassionate but they turned to the family and said: 'You know you have to clean this up!' So this was not like ER at all. I stood up to help but there was almost a sense of apathy. And there were people with almost a sense of helplessness, like they didn't know what to do. I guess a lot of people fear questioning. If they know someone is doing something wrong, they don't question that person. A lot of people see health professionals as: they know it all and I don't know anything, so let's not intervene. It is not like it is in the Canadian culture; if family members see a nurse do something wrong there, they will not hesitate to tell that nurse otherwise. But in Uganda they will just be quiet. I think that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) makes Health Professionals humble, it puts them in their patients' shoes, and it makes them even more compassionate. It is definitely not ER in a local hospital in Uganda!

*If it is a cultural thing, and due to PBL you are going to be a different doctor: what kind of doctor would you like to be?*

Mind you I've only been at Makerere University for one year so far. I see myself as a physician whom people can connect to. Instead of me standing and asking questions I'd like to sit beside them. I wouldn't even want to put a desk between me and them, because then I'd install a barrier. I would like them to see that I am empathizing with them, that I am a human being trying to connect with them at a personal level. But also, I'd like to look at their health holistically. There are of course cultural constraints that may burden them or that are the reason why they can't express themselves. I would also like to think that people could open up to me and not repress their thoughts and feelings. And it would also depend on where I would be practicing and on the culture. You know, even in Uganda there are many tribes and every tribe has their own language. People often think Ugandans are all the same but that is not necessarily so. In the North there are different dynamics than in Kampala. I would like to do research or just read about the psychology of cultures, what kinds of things they find acceptable. I think PBL is good because it will allow you to meet with other cultures. You need to understand who these people are, where they are coming from, what their history is. You need to pick up a bit of their language. Language is amazing; even a simple "Hello, how are you?" sets people at ease, when you make that effort.

*In what kind of setting would you prefer to be working later?*

I've always pictured myself in a city culture, but after this Network: TUFH conference I find myself thinking: maybe working in rural areas is not so bad. I was very humbled and enlightened by the work Network people are doing.

They realize they need income but they are doing something to benefit their community. This conference has given me the perspective to help me say: OK Ramullah, why are you doing this, you know you came into medicine to help people, income is important but you have got to see the big picture, to see what's being done in Sudan, in India. For some people it may seem insignificant but it is significant for those people who have been helped. I was quite moved by such examples. I realized that this issue is directly connected to income, but you don't need excess money.

*So, you talked about how you would like to work and how you want to be trained. By means of your poster and your paper you have identified yourself in favour of PBL, although things can be improved. How do you feel about PBL in general?*
I love it! Maybe because I came from a lecture system, which I liked at times, but at times I felt that I could do more work on my own in the time I was sitting there and listening. Especially in tutorial sessions, it is amazing how much information you can get on one topic, different perspectives people bring to the table and you can enjoy that. It changes the whole scope of learning and your depth. In the lecture system you are constrained to the information in the textbook. In PBL it's like this: I read this particular book but I know other colleagues probably had access to other books so I can get a different perspective on, for example, the mechanisms of hormones. I have more independence. I have a pace at which I learn, digest information, make notes and I'm very selective. I like the liberty of being selective in what I read and how I read it. In a lecture system the test is constrained to these specific books, these specific pages.

*So in PBL you use the freedom to express yourself. Do you feel that you need a certain level of outspokenness to benefit maximally from PBL?*
In the beginning people were very quiet in our school, not expressing themselves, or only slightly. But now I see that none of us is afraid to express ideas, we are not afraid to interrupt, we are talking more and there is more dialogue. We have weekly discussions, we meet outside the tutorials.
The staff have been so comforting. At the beginning we were so worried, trying to grasp the concept of PBL. The staff were very reassuring, mentoring and comforting throughout the course. Every week they would say: OK, what are your concerns, how can we make it better? And they would keep throwing at us: OK you are doing fine, your scores are OK, because we worried about how we were going to be examined, tested. I remember, in the first four tests, our assessment was based on the old curriculum. The staff did their best to reassure us: 'OK, these are the growing pains, we don't know all the answers, we are going through a growing process ourselves'. We as students of the first year of PBL only had each other, the older students were laughing at us ('You are never going to make it').

*So it encouraged collaboration rather than competition?*
That's also what I like about PBL, there is a corporate learning: let's share knowledge. In my undergraduate period in Canada there was cut-throat competition, people would not share, or would even deny their knowledge.

*You have had Community-Based Education in the first year. In the first week you had clinical exposure. How do you feel about that?*
Wonderful! When you read in books you don't know what it looks like in real practice. You read about glands and hormones and all difficulties. But then you see a patient and that is a perfect illustration, a live translation. And the physicians are perfect. They ask questions all the time. ''You see this patient is pale, you see his extended stomach, what does that mean?'' I like the transition from normal to abnormal. We had a block on cardio-respiratory complaints. When you see these patients you learn to appreciate the embryological development of the heart. It helps you to see... In a lecture system you take units, but in PBL you actually take that together, so you integrate different parts of your knowledge.

The COBES-programme (COmmunity-Based Education and Service) was nice. One thing I really appreciated was that they take you into the community; you actually live with these people, you feel what these people are going through. To be honest, a lot of us come from privileged backgrounds.

*Would you say that this holds for all students or are you in a special position, since you've lived in Canada?*
Well, I was definitely very humbled. I have lived a very good life. But this also holds for the other students, who were mostly from Kampala. I met one student from Gulu, which was a possible COBES-site. Many students didn't want to go there because it is a war zone. She went to that place and she wanted to educate us. Apac was another site that we did not want to go to at first. But then, seven students, including myself, went there, and it did give us very good, humbling experiences. There is disparity, and now we can educate others that it is not that bad. We lived there, ate there, had tutorial sessions and home visits. It was very instructive. I was quite overwhelmed. It opened my eyes. I learned to see things from a different angle. When I came back I kept on thinking about their circumstances: that made me humble.

*What does that do to you and your family? Can you get your experiences across to your family?*
I have two brothers in Canada and three in Uganda. I keep telling them what it is like. They visited and they can understand it, but they haven't lived in the motherland! It is so different when you really live here! I have thought the decision was overambitious, but then I convinced myself that I would be going to appreciate it. Being here was instrumental in overcoming my insecurity. And the culture shock.

*You've talked about what you learn and about how you learn, as well as the 'mentoring sessions' with the staff who are comforting. I guess that would make you as a group also fairly influential. Do you feel that you are being listened to?*
The staff want their curriculum to be effective and sustainable. So far, a lot has changed already, after our comments. We've seen the second years' material, and it has improved. They see us as another source of information about the programme. There was no programme evaluation before. At first the upper years criticized us, ''it's not going to be effective''. They were discouraging us. Only a few people said: ''Oh this is an innovative curriculum, good for Makerere.''

*You are so positive; if you were the Dean, what would you change?*
Not much. Keep a steady pace, make sure there is constant feedback to and from all stake holders. Students as well as tutors. Some tutors are not happy with the PBL, they could get more encouragement. Midway through the programme we found that tutor attendance was not that high. They just cannot afford to sit six hours with a group. You've got to make sure that people work hard, and also that students and tutors are motivated. And I would improve the accessibility of books and computers. Everything else they have been doing is fine!

*How do you feel about the Network: TUFH and about the Student Network Organization (SNO)?*
I have always been very involved in my schools, there was not one single committee I was not a member of. I had promised myself to ease up on my involvement, to be very quiet and observant during this conference. I have only recently found out about the Network: TUFH through Dr Sarah Kiguli, one of the lecturers at Makerere. I still remember her first tutorial in March, in which she said: ''There is this conference, if you want to do research.'' I thought OK, I'll think about it. Some students were really frustrated, and I thought let's do something constructive with it. I only found out that I could come here on the Friday evening before the conference actually started. The poster was done this Saturday, a week ago. I thought: ''let me just go and see what I can do''. I envisioned it as a really huge powerful smooth organization. So when I came here and found out that there was really no student organization, I thought: let's do something. It is possible. It is amazing, we come from different places in the world and we can join and work together. Take for instance our student poster session: we realized that on the spot. I will try to connect students and share experiences with different curricula: Networking. At these conferences you meet potential future leaders. We must start at student level, to become a ''United Nations of Students'' working together in health perspective.

*Do you have any final thoughts to add?*
The conference is very good. My fellow students Catherine, Harriet and I will write a report for our faculty. Don't be shy to do research, find yourself a tutor, you can do it! Be confident! Other students thought it was just another questionnaire that they would not ever again hear from. But I will ask for feedback, I will be accountable.

I will end with a quote from a fellow student, Godfrey Kwizera: ''Never underestimate a PBL-student''. We are becoming reflective thinkers!

*Thank you very much, and I wish you much happiness and success in your future career!*