

Virtual Mentor

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VIEWPOINT

Matthew Lukwiya, MD

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The honorific title of "[hero](#)" falls easily from our lips these days. We call multimillion-dollar sports celebrities heroes for playing children's games. Yet the true title of hero should be hard-won. It should capture the sacrifice of self-interest for the benefit of others. It should describe those whose actions surpass by far what duty demands. One such hero was physician Matthew Lukwiya of Uganda.

Dr. Matthew Lukwiya was a leader in the fight against the deadly Ebola virus that plagues parts of Africa. He worked for years as superintendent of Lacor Hospital in Gulu, Uganda. A dedicated physician, his commitment to his community marked him as a role model for all health care professionals. Dr. Lukwiya saved many lives in his fight against Ebola; and in doing so, he paid the ultimate price. The disease that claimed so many lives in Uganda also claimed his.

The bright young Ugandan doctor, one of the best medical students in Uganda, was awarded medical scholarships and prizes. He had received a master's degree from the prestigious Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine in England. Qualified and invited to serve in more affluent communities, he chose instead to go where the need was greatest, an Italian missionary hospital outside Gulu. Most well-qualified Ugandan physicians leave the country in search of better opportunities. But Dr. Lukwiya stayed home. As his widow Margaret Lukwiya states, 'He felt that holding a position meant having responsibility Matthew was not for worldly desires He was just devoted to his patients. It was never business. It was just his patients. That was it.'

In honor of his humanitarianism, the Italian government offered 10 scholarships for young Ugandan doctors, while the United States Agency for International Development gave Lacor Hospital a grant of \$100,000.

Although Lacor is considered one of the best hospitals in sub-Saharan Africa, Gulu is one of its poorest regions. This northern part of Uganda is pocked by skirmishes with its neighbor to the north, Sudan. For years, Dr. Lukwiya's biggest challenge was caring for the thousands of patients who were the casualties of the bloody fighting with the Lord's Resistance Group, a rebel group. Moreover, he played a significant role in the peace movement, a role that he refused to publicize.

Because they give their all, the lives of heroes are often short. Dr. Lukwiya was struck down in his early 40s. He was the first to recognize that people were contracting the Ebola virus and is credited for the relatively low death toll, which reached 162 last December. Once he identified the virus, he organized his staff and international bodies such as the WHO to combat the deadly contagion. Amidst a climate of hysteria regarding the outbreak, Dr. Lukwiya's death only fanned the flames of fear. But his work was instrumental in preventing the spread of the virus.

For his valiant effort at combating a deadly epidemic, and his resolute commitment to his patients, we humbly name Dr. Matthew Lukwiya a role model in the field of medicine.

There is a further dimension to heroism. Heroes and their actions inspire those who follow; they challenge us to match our efforts against those of the hero and see how we measure up. The value and meaning of Dr. Lukwiya's heroism will be fully realized only when physicians accept the challenge to measure up by dedicating their professional efforts to eradicating the global catastrophe of AIDS. As earlier plagues such as smallpox and polio have elicited their heroes, AIDS demands its own acts of heroism. Dr. Lukwiya and others like him have shown us an example and thrown the gauntlet in front of us.

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