

**Obituary: Alex Onzere Kirasi OLUMBE, 4 February 1963 to 12 April 2023**



**Authors: Charles Naylor and Stephen Cordner**

Associate Professor Alex Olumbe was born in Kenya on 4 February 1963 to Fanice and Jotham Olumbe.

After completing primary and secondary school in Nairobi (1969-79), Alex spent his last two years of schooling at Njiiris High School, Muranga. There he enjoyed sport, soccer, and captaining his basketball team. His role as house captain perhaps foreshadowed his future leadership roles.

In 1982 and 1983, Alex worked as a secondary school science teacher, before embarking on medical training. He completed two degrees at the University of Nairobi - Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery in 1988 and Master of Medicine in Human Pathology and Microbiology in 1993 - working as an intern at Nyeri Provincial General Hospital (1988-89) and then as a pathology registrar at the Kenyatta National Hospital (1989-93). Alex's appointment as inaugural chair of the Kenya Anti-Rape Organisation (1991-93), reflecting an interest in forensic medicine and its profound human dimensions, was followed soon afterwards by his first appointment in forensic pathology.

After qualifying as pathologist in 1993, Alex worked for two months as Provincial Pathologist in the Western Province of Kenya, and then, until 1995, as medico-legal government pathologist at the Nairobi City Morgue. The latter followed recognition by the Director of Medical Services that the role required a qualified pathologist.

In 1994, Alex was awarded a World Health Organisation (WHO) fellowship to study either in Australia or London. As he himself laughingly said, he based his decision on

his weather preferences! So, he came to Australia and the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine (VIFM) in 1995, an experience, he said, which inspired him to pursue forensic pathology as his future career. In 1996, he attained both the Diploma in Forensic Medicine of the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia, and the Diploma in Medical Jurisprudence of the Society of Apothecaries, a venerable British livery company whose examinations he had to sit in Hong Kong. In December 1996, the Chair of the VIFM Council (and Chief Justice of Victoria) awarded Alex a certificate of merit as WHO Fellow in Forensic Pathology in recognition of his contribution to the work and life of VIFM during his two years there.

Alex returned to Kenya in 1997 where he was appointed Head of Medico-legal Services and Chief Government Pathologist the following year, serving a national population of 30 million. This proved to be both rewarding and exceptionally challenging, as it entailed performing over 50 autopsies a week and attending court 25 times each month. In particular, he was responsible for autopsies in a number of mass fatalities, most notably after the bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi in 1998, when he performed examinations on all 201 victims, presenting reports to the FBI one month later.

In 1996, he was appointed as Honorary Senior Lecturer in Forensic Medicine at Monash University, Melbourne and subsequently a part-time senior lecturer in Health Sciences at Nairobi University where he helped develop the teaching of Forensic Medicine. He also supervised law students' dissertations on the evidential value of forensic pathology and the realities of torture in Kenya, as well as teaching pathologists in East and Central Africa under the auspices of the VIFM.

In 2000, he was accredited as a specialist forensic pathologist by the Medical Practitioners and Dentists Board of Kenya.

Alex knew that attending selected death scenes can provide the pathologist with vital evidence, but while in Kenya discovered such attendance could be misinterpreted. After visiting the death scene of a vocal opposition politician early one day, the papers, far from praising his thoroughness, later claimed he had interfered with evidence. The same happened when Alex drove 100 km to examine *in situ* the body of a land-activist American Catholic priest found dead with a shotgun wound. Fortunately, the FBI attended Alex's autopsy and had his report and conclusions reviewed by the pre-eminent expert on gunshot wounds Professor Vincent Di Maio, who concurred.

In another controversial death, it was claimed Alex had been bribed to cover up the true cause of death. His autopsy revealed no injuries in the sister of a senior lawyer, but instead showed natural heart disease (sarcoidosis) which fully explained her collapse and sudden death. Her family was not happy as it contradicted their allegations about her husband who had been detained.

Alex testified in court a number of times a week, with the result that he could be required in two courts at once. This prompted one magistrate to claim he had insulted her court by not appearing and summarily sentenced him to prison. Although a fine was substituted thanks to the police commissioner, only the Attorney General was able to convince him to not to resign. This incident, together with frequent threatening telephone calls, made Alex realise he would have to leave Kenya. The seriousness of the situation was highlighted by a senior public servant who said Alex was the first doctor in Kenya to have a police bodyguard (and, as it happened, a police driver).

Although the foregoing shows how his integrity could be challenged, Alex was also acutely conscious that his quasi-celebrity status could have the opposite effect with his court testimony being taken as gospel truth without any challenge at all. It is a measure of the man that he considered this equally dangerous.

Alex was proud of what he achieved in Kenya and of maintaining his professional standards, for which he credits his training and ongoing links with VIFM. Reportedly, his legacy persists, and his protocols are still followed. The series of lectures given through the British Council had a beneficial impact.

In Kenya, Alex became an internationally recognised forensic adviser to the WHO, FBI, Amnesty International, the British High Commission and even a Yorkshire Coroner regarding death investigations and medico-legal autopsies in East Africa. In 2002, for example, he was appointed as a forensic expert for the "Centre for International Forensic Assistance" based at the University of Dundee. He provided alerts for deaths in custody and invited independent observers where appropriate.

In 2001, Alex co-authored the "Handbook of Forensic Medicine and Medical Law in Kenya" with South African colleagues, which has been used by the police and by the school of law. In 2005, a similar handbook for East Africa was written and is still in use. He wrote a chapter on postmortem changes for a South African textbook on medico-legal practice published in 2001. He also helped develop a 'Forensic Pathology Manual' working with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (for which he received a certificate of appreciation from the Minister of Health for the Kingdom of Jordan).

Alex was also proud of work he did with Dr David Wells of VIFM on sexual assault for the WHO, and in 2013 acted as adviser to the WHO in Geneva on guidelines for strengthening the medico-legal response to sexual violence in conflict settings, published in 2015. Similarly, in 2002-03, Alex had assisted the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva to develop a protocol for identifying those missing after armed conflicts entitled "The Missing".

In 2002, due to the difficult working conditions mentioned, as well as for family reasons, an international recruitment campaign prompted Alex to apply for a forensic pathology post in Queensland. Alex was appointed as a Senior Medical Officer in Forensic Pathology at the John Tonge Centre in Brisbane where he started on 2 September 2002, joining Queensland Health's Pathology Services.

Although Alex's initial medical registration required him to practice under the supervision of senior forensic pathologists, it soon became clear to those who had not previously known Alex that he was a very knowledgeable and skilful forensic pathologist. However, Alex's particular trajectory meant that attaining full specialist registration in Australia ultimately obliged him to pass two further specialist examinations for Fellowships of both the College of Forensic Pathologists in South Africa (2005) and the Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (2010). As a result, he then held five qualifications in pathology!

Alex's dozen years practicing forensic pathology in Brisbane (2002-14) were notable for a number of achievements, for example developing special interests and expertise in custodial deaths, and in deaths after complex health procedures, especially cardiac surgery. Lawyers including the Deputy Director of Public Prosecutions commented favourably on the assistance Alex provided to lawyers and courts.

However, one of his foremost achievements during this time was ability to adapt to and champion innovation, including legislative change, working with new professional groups such as coronial nurses, and adopting new technology, for example CT scanning and Dragon dictation. Alex's adaptability and eye for better practices no doubt reflected his career in several very different coronial jurisdictions, an educational benefit for trainees and younger pathologists to bear in mind when considering future forensic pathology training and experience.

In January 2015, Alex received a departmental Australia Day Achievement Award for excellence in a particularly complex and high-profile coronial autopsy and medical death investigation of a mother and daughter who had died overseas.

In 2014, dismayed by planned changes to doctors' conditions of employment, Alex applied for a forensic pathologist post at Wollongong in New South Wales where his appointment gave him valuable insights into coronial practice in a third Australian jurisdiction. However, for family reasons, he was happy a year later to be selected to fill a vacancy at the Gold Coast University Hospital with a new forensic mortuary and pathology laboratory.

Working initially with one pathologist colleague, later increasing to two plus one trainee, Alex threw himself into helping manage a demanding caseload from the Gold Coast and surrounding areas, collaborating closely with varied professionals, such as laboratory personnel, coronial nurses and radiologists, from the latter of whom Alex learnt to enhance still further his skilful use of a dedicated CT scanner, the first installed at a regional forensic mortuary in Australia. As a result, Alex won many plaudits from coroners and coronial registrars for the outstanding service he provided.

Alex had great rapport with staff, was an excellent communicator - especially with families, interaction with whom he greatly valued – and enjoyed the respect of his medical and coronial colleagues. In 2016, Alex's exceptional abilities and achievements as both an international expert and a teacher were recognised by meritorious progression to Eminent Staff Specialist in Queensland Health, and the award of the honorary academic title of Clinical Associate Professor at Griffith University. In the final 18 months of his extraordinary career, he acted as Chief Forensic Pathologist for Queensland, a post he had perhaps hoped to attain on a permanent basis.

Alex's professional approach, intellectual insights and personal warmth are sorely missed by the very many people who feel privileged to have known and worked with him. He died peacefully on 12 April 2023 at the Gold Coast surrounded by family. Alex is survived by his five adult children, Mwanaisha, Donald, Dina, Debra and Stephen.