



## HISTORY OF MEDICINE

### The last cohort of early black doctors who studied abroad, 1931 - 1940

Anne Digby

Roseberry T Bokwe (1900 - 1963) was schooled at Lovedale, as was his grandfather, Jacob Bokwe, one of the school's first pupils. After further study at the South African Native College (later the University of Fort Hare) to gain a teaching diploma, he became Headmaster of the John Dube School, Ohlange, and then went to the University of Edinburgh to study medicine. He qualified MB ChB in 1933, after which he returned to the Eastern Cape, where he practised at Middledrift. Here he became a member of the Lovedale Governing Council and the Victoria Hospital Board. Appointed the first black assistant district surgeon in 1938, he was promoted 7 years later to full district surgeon. He served such a wide area that contemporaries recollected that 'he was always tired', and 'one of the hardest-worked in the land ... public-spirited to a fault'.<sup>1,2</sup> The doctor's social idealism led him to practise in the very impoverished area of Middledrift where some patients literally starved to death in adverse drought conditions.<sup>3</sup> Bokwe established his own private maternity home, although this seems to have had low priority among his many activities, as it was later closed down as a health hazard. Like many of his colleagues he was active politically, becoming Treasurer and then Chairman of the ANC in the Cape, as well as Speaker at the ANC annual conferences in 1950 and 1951.

Rotoli Xaba's early history exemplifies in acute form the problems of foreign study for aspiring South African doctors. Unusually, his correspondence from his period in Edinburgh during the mid-1920s has survived, revealing the financial, linguistic and educational difficulties he faced, and prompting cries of despair and calls for help from his family and his sponsors, the foreign mission of the Free Church of Scotland, and the Bunga (or General Council of the Transkeian Territories.) His hand-to-mouth existence was painfully

apparent in his surviving correspondence – he found difficulty paying for essentials like clothing and boots as well as paying rent to his landlady. She threatened eviction, although reluctantly because 'I have always found him to be a most respectable boarder and works very hard to get on.' Meanwhile, Xaba was trying not to be distracted by his financial problems. 'I hope that I shall be qualified next year as I am studying very hard.' In addition, he got special coaches ('a very expensive project') to help him prepare for his examinations. Two years later Xaba was taking what he envisaged were his finals, but flunked them. 'Really, it is very hard and disappointing ... So I am to study very hard again.' He found his failure difficult to bear. 'I really do not want to return to Africa without being qualified, as I am afraid, it is a great *shame*, and will be like taking my life *down*.' But he devised a way forward by getting paid work while studying at Columbia University in New York. In 1929 his father became seriously ill and Xaba had to return to South Africa, where he stayed until his father's death 6 years later, meanwhile working as a medical assistant to two white doctors in the Transkei. In 1932 he tried to enter the University of the Witwatersrand as a fourth-year medical student, but was told that this was not possible because of 'social difficulties' in gaining necessary clinical experience. Finally achieving sufficient solvency to return to Scotland, he gained his triple Scottish qualification (LRCP and LRCS from Edinburgh and LRFPS from Glasgow). Returning to the Cape, he was licensed to practise in 1937, and set up a few miles south of his home

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Signing the Doctors' Pact



Monty Naicker, Yusuf Dadoo

at Idutywa in Willowvale. Later, when Xaba could view the past through the confident prism of his successful, multiracial practice, he wrote brief recollections of his first stay in Scotland and made light of his earlier problems – everyone was ‘very nice’, and the instruction was ‘good’.<sup>4,6</sup>

A sizeable group of Durban doctors were among those South African medics trained abroad during the 1930s. Among them was Keshar Macken Mistry, who qualified MB ChB at Edinburgh in 1932, Moonsamy Gorindsamy, who gained the Scottish Triple in the same year, and Kaiseveloo Naidoo, who qualified MB ChB at Edinburgh and then practised at 25 Brown Drift Road, Durban. Also in this group of Durban doctors were Chadwick N Dhlamini, who had qualified with the Scottish Triple in 1939 and developed a practice on Beach Street, Durban, and Nagindas P Desai who had gained an LMSSA in London in 1940, and who practised on Prince Edward Street, Durban.

Goonarathnam Goonam (1906 - 1998) was born into the Naidoo family in 1906. She was only the second black medical woman in South Africa. She studied in Scotland alongside Monty Naicker and Yusuf Dadoo (see below), and qualified at Edinburgh in 1936 with an MB and ChB, before practising on Umgeni Road in Durban. In her autobiography she told how ‘There was prejudice against a woman doctor – she didn’t look like one. I remember a door being shut in my face by a housewife early in my practice because I was a woman.’ She also remembered feeling helpless in the face of the superstition and poverty of her patients.<sup>7,8</sup> She became a political activist in the Natal Indian Congress.

Gangathura (Monty) Naicker (1910 - 1980) achieved a Scottish Triple, and from 1934 practised among poor Indians in Durban. Involvement with the socio-economic problems of his patients, together with his own family’s history (Naicker’s grandparents had been brought to Natal from India as indentured workers in the sugar plantations) helped forge a radical political consciousness. From 1945 he was President of the Natal Indian Congress, working as part of a collective leadership, where

he spoke on the need to ‘mobilise all our strength to seem as better life ... all we want is to live as free citizens in a free world’.<sup>9</sup> With Dr Xuma of the ANC, and Dr Yusuf Dadoo of the Transvaal Indian Congress came the Xuma-Naicker-Dadoo Pact, popularly known as the ‘Doctors’ Pact’, or more formally as the Joint Declaration of Co-operation of 1947. Directed against racist white supremacy, this in turn underpinned the Congress Alliance of 1955. Monty Naicker was imprisoned after the Defiance Campaign of 1952, arrested for high treason in 1956, and suffered continuous banning orders from 1960 to 1974. He was hailed as ‘our greatest Indian leader since Gandhi’ by his comrade, Yusuf Dadoo.<sup>10</sup>

Yusuf Mohammed Dadoo (1909 - 1983) was born in Krugersdorp to parents who had been born in India. He matriculated at Aligarh Muslim College in India, and then in 1929 went to study medicine in London, but his political activism there made his father, a businessman, transfer his studies to the University of Edinburgh. Here he qualified MB ChB in 1934. Returning to South Africa in 1936 he practised medicine in Johannesburg East, but his political activities continued in tandem with his medicine. He directed his political energies and his powerful oratory towards constructing unity in a developing national liberation movement – he became President of the Indian Congress in the Transvaal, then President of the South African Congress, and President of the South African Communist Party before it was banned in 1950. He was active in the passive resistance campaign of 1947, and the Defiance Campaign of 1952, the latter leading to his banning. Alongside Chief Albert Luthuli and Father Trevor Huddleston, ‘Doc’ was honoured by being given the Isitwalandwe Scaparankoe Award by the Congress of the People in 1955. Five years later he went underground to forestall arrest, going into exile first in Botswana and then eventually in Britain.

Much less is known about two other doctors in this cohort. In 1937 Robert Frederick Setlogelo qualified LRCP and LRCS (Edinburgh) as well as LRFPS (Glasgow) before practising in Bloemfontein, while Dawood A Patel gained the Scottish Triple in 1940 and practised in Bloemhof in the Transvaal.

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2. Jabavu N. *The Ochre People*. Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1982: 20.
3. Wilson F, Perrot D. *Outlook on a Century*. Lovedale: Lovedale Press, 1973: 427.
4. National Library of Scotland MS 7549. Correspondence of R Xaba, May-July 1912.
5. National Library of Scotland MS 7815. Correspondence with Malan Mission, Idutywa, July - November 1926.
6. *S Afr Med J* 25 November 1944.
7. Goonam G. *Coolie Doctor: An Autobiography*. Durban: Madiba, 1991: 57, 60-61, 63.
8. [www.pitzer.edu/new\\_african\\_movement](http://www.pitzer.edu/new_african_movement).
9. Naicker M. Speech on election as President of the Natal Indian Congress. Leader 27 October 1945.
10. Yusuf Dadoo Collection. Our greatest Indian leader since Gandhi. [www.liberation.org.za/collections/sacp/dadoo](http://www.liberation.org.za/collections/sacp/dadoo).