

Working for Change in Uganda: The Collaboration of Dr. Julian Atim and Physicians for Human Rights' Health Action AIDS Campaign.

How does a young woman from Uganda who was orphaned by AIDS as a child go on to become a medical doctor and a spokesperson for health and human rights in her homeland? This is the story of Julian Atim, who embarked on a journey to address the health care needs of her people and is collaborating with Physicians for Human Rights in an international campaign to end the AIDS epidemic in Uganda.

The partnership between Dr. Atim and PHR began in 2004 when she attended an international health conference organized by PHR-HAA and the Action Group for Health, Human Rights and HIV/AIDS (AGHA). The conference brought together 130 Ugandan health professionals, including Dr. Atim (then a young medical student), to discuss advocacy and human rights. It changed her life:

When I look back, I [initially] saw becoming a doctor as a calling to save lives,” “Now, I see that being a doctor includes for me two other components: advocacy and human rights. Patients in Uganda see doctors as doing them a favor and not that they [as human beings] have the right to receive health care. But what I learned from PHR is that I am accountable for that patient.”

According to Dr. Atim, this conference on human rights and HIV/AIDS offered new insights into the relationship between poverty and disease. And, these insights were all the more empowering because they were shared in the company of a community of health professionals that sought to make a difference. Dr. Atim met with PHR staff members, Susannah Sirkin and Sarah Kalloch, and told them about her desire to do more for her community. She herself had lost her parents to AIDS and was determined to turn this experience around and make a difference in the world. Susannah and Sarah spoke with her about the power of students to make change and shared their experience with student advocacy groups in the U.S.

The conference had prepared Dr. Atim and three of her fellow medical students well. Just a week after the conference, they formed a human rights advocacy group which they called *Students for Equity and Health Care* (SEHC) and conducted a training on human rights advocacy for an additional 75 students. Three months later, they held their first AIDS “Week of Action,” which reached over 300 medical students with AIDS/human rights messages. They successfully lobbied officials at Kampala’s Mulago Hospital to supply staff with post-exposure HIV prophylaxis. This action resulted in hospital-wide education and advocacy for doctor and patient rights to protection in Uganda.

What Atim learned from PHR was critical to her work in Uganda. Atim says that in order to push for change, one must have a core set of skills. Through PHR, she has received training in domestic violence, HIV treatments, problem-solving skills, and how to articulate her ideas most effectively. She says that regular visits to Uganda from PHR staff - to help train new students, conduct outreach and stay in close touch with the media about their work - keeps their significant progress moving forward.

A year later, in April 2006, SEHC expanded to a national audience, hosting the first student AIDS advocacy conference in Uganda, which led to the creation of SEHC chapters at four Ugandan medical schools. Then, in September of 2006, SEHC won a major victory for health workers. The students secured donations to purchase gloves and cover Hepatitis B vaccinations

for all medical students at Makerere University. At the launch of this initiative, the Minister of Health himself promised that the government would make Hepatitis B vaccines available for all Ugandan health workers. Atim believes that advocating for these critical safeguards may sharpen the resolve of health professionals to practice medicine in their homeland, for more than half of the health workers trained in Uganda leave the country for better working conditions.

The stigma of HIV/AIDS still affects medical care in Uganda today. Dr. Atim continues to work with SEHC to ensure that the stigma of an HIV/AIDS diagnosis, which affected her own family when her parents were ill, is replaced by a thorough understanding of the disease. She has also worked to see that health workers learn how to protect themselves and that they need not fear exposure.

“If we can be better doctors to our patients by having our needs as doctors met [i.e., access to gloves, Hepatitis B vaccine], they [the patients] will ultimately benefit.”

Together with PHR, AGHA has formed a network of over 600 Ugandan health workers dedicated to AIDS advocacy. As a member of AGAR, Dr. Atim continues to be involved, even while out of the country pursuing a Masters degree at Harvard University. She recently spoke at a U.S. conference on the role of medical students in global health, encouraging students from 11 different medical schools to work in clinics throughout Africa.

Not only did PHR help Dr. Atim find a new language and understanding for her personal and professional experience with illness among Africa's poor, they also provided her and her contemporaries with training to improve their skills as advocates.

“PHR has helped me in so many ways to become an advocate not just for my patients, but for my people. I've become a better leader as a result of being involved with PHR.”

Dr. Jennifer Leaning, of the Harvard School of Public Health's Department of Global Health and Population, concurs:

“Dr. Atim's ambitions as a doctor meet seamlessly with PHR's empathetic recognition of her passion and abilities as a leader.”

In just two years - the first as a student and the second as a practicing physician - Dr. Atim accomplished so much in Northern Uganda that PHR brought her to the U.S. to be honored at their 20th Anniversary Gala. Dr. Atim spent almost three weeks in the United States on a speaking tour sponsored by PHR prior to the Anniversary event. Her visit included numerous meetings on Capitol Hill, ten media interviews, and talks at nearly a dozen medical schools. But the most memorable moment came when the health work force issue was folded into PEPFAR funding. The timing of her visit was tied to a very broad-based Health Care Work Force campaign by PHR.

Some of the highlights of her trip include speaking on a panel about the humanitarian response to the conflict in Northern Uganda (40% of the Ugandan health workers have fled due to the conflict), meeting with policymakers to discuss the conflict and request support of the U.S. for peace, and addressing student activists on the health care work force crisis at prestigious universities along the eastern seaboard. Dr. Atim also spoke extensively to the national media about AIDS and the conflict in Uganda. She has since been featured in articles in the *Washington*

Post and the *Boston Globe*, been interviewed on *NPR* and *Voice of America*, and appeared in documentaries by *Black Entertainment Television* and *CNN* for World AIDS Day 2006.

PHR's Eric Friedman, who has worked with Dr. Atim, says:

"Working with Dr. Atim brings an immediacy to the issues of human rights and advocacy. They come alive [in a way that statistics fail to] because her work provides a window on the day-to-day struggles of the Northern Ugandan people ."

This is the model PHR brings to their work of education and mobilization to address health as a human right. Shirley Velasquez, a reporter for *Glamour Magazine*, comments:

"(Dr. Atim) is on this fragile path to heal her community by creating a network of organizations and health workers who set up clinics, raise funds to train more nurses and doctors, and educate locals in medical services outreach."

Very few other organizations partner with local groups to build capacity, but it is at this most local level, with local people doing the hard work, that PHR promotes success. The knowledge and skills that the organization provides to its members, and what its members are inspired to do with that knowledge, constitute the core of the Health Action AIDS Campaign. For Dr. Atim and other local leaders with whom PHR works, this model has proven successful.

Just recently, Dr. Atim's vision of improving the medical infrastructure for Uganda has become all that much more attainable. This year's budget for PEPFAR includes funding to support and train at least 140,000 new health professionals in countries of need - to achieve a minimum staffing target of 2-3 doctors, nurses, and midwives per 1,000 population, with safer working conditions for health workers as a priority.

Of Physicians for Human Rights, Dr. Atim says,

"PHR's work in Uganda has both directly and indirectly brought change to people's lives. It is so amazing that they exist. Their impact [in this country] has been so great."