OBITUARY

Professor Felix Salaniponi, 1955–2014

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Professor Felix Martin L Salaniponi, MPH, PhD, who was at the helm of the Malawi National Tuberculosis Control Programme (NTP) from 1991 to 2008, first as programme manager and then as director in the Ministry of Health and Population, died suddenly on 13 August 2014. He was a great and compassionate man. He qualified as a clinical officer from the Malawi College of Health Sciences and soon after was appointed as the district health officer in Ntcheu District, Central Region, Malawi, in 1981. He held this position for ten years, and then in August 1991 was appointed NTP manager in charge of tuberculosis (TB) control for the country.

It was as manager and director of the NTP that Felix made his mark and showed his true greatness. Malawi, as with the rest of Southern Africa, began to see the effects of the HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune-deficiency syndrome) epidemic on TB control in the 1990s: the numbers of patients increased dramatically, by over 500%, the diagnosis of TB became difficult as patients increasingly developed smear-negative and disseminated disease, cure rates plummeted and case fatality rose. Despite these challenges, Felix's personality and management style continued to ensure that the NTP was an attractive and suitable partner for receiving continued technical assistance and financial support from the International Union Against TB and Lung Disease (The Union) and KNCV Tuberculosis Foundation (KNCV).

In 1996, Felix persuaded the Ministry of Health to start a programme of operational research (OR) focused on how to best manage HIV-associated TB, and insisted that it be embedded within the structure of the NTP. The OR programme developed into a global example of how research should guide the improvement of programme operations. Supported by government donors in the UK, and later Sweden and Norway, it took a critical look at all aspects of TB control, testing many innovative ways to combat the ravages of HIV and TB. This required courage, open-mindedness,

Photograph by
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progressive thinking and vision on Felix's part, as programmatic deficiencies were brought to light, but he never flinched from the task of being critical about the performance of the programme and he ensured that relevant OR findings were immediately translated into policy and implementation, ultimately improving the lives of those affected by HIV/AIDS and TB. As a result Malawi became a global leader in the development of collaborative TB-HIV activities and in the use of evidence to underpin access to care.

Felix was wonderfully inclusive. He set up the TB Programme Management Group, which met 6-weekly with representation from non-governmental organisations, the medical college, the HIV/AIDS community and international institutions, to guide decisions on TB control and relevant OR. He led from the front, often first into work in the morning and last to leave at night. Yet his hard work and dedication to duty never affected his great sense of humour and charm, and he was always a pleasure to be with and great company both at work and off duty. As a person and colleague he was friendly, approachable and responsive, setting

an example for everyone. In his role as programme manager and director, he developed into a true leader and excellent team manager who commanded respect from all stakeholders, including high level management in the Ministry and political leadership in the country. As an advocate for TB control he became a well-known influential national expert who frequently featured in newspaper articles and on television, in which he described the challenges in the country and the need for the Ministry to show leadership and commitment in TB and HIV control. His leadership of the NTP and his spearheading of OR meant he was much in demand at the World Health Organization both in Africa and Geneva, where he made a huge contribution to strategic thinking about the best ways to tackle HIV-associated tuberculosis in Africa and the rest of the world. He was a member of the Board of Directors of The Union and participated in the Stop TB Coordinating Board and technical working groups.

In 2008, Felix joined KNCV as a senior consultant in the Nairobi office. His knowledge and experience from Malawi guided a small group of more junior consultants in the establishment of a KNCV regional technical assistance hub, supporting many countries in Africa. Felix was personally involved in supporting the development of national strategies in Ghana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Kenya. In Kenya he was also strongly involved in assisting the Division of Leprosy Tuberculosis and Lung Disease of the Ministry of Health to obtain official ISO certification, culminating in the development of a National Quality Manual. In addition,

the development of a training curriculum for district health staff in Kenya, which still forms the basis of annual training courses, would never have been realised without his leadership. In many situations, KNCV was very fortunate to have a person like Felix at this level, as his authority and diplomacy skills often helped to negotiate through difficult processes.

His personal development was a source of inspiration and a role model for many in Malawi and other African countries, as he showed what could be done by hard work and commitment. He obtained a Diploma of Clinical Medicine from the University of Nairobi, Kenya, in 1986; a Masters in Public Health from the University of Cardiff, Wales, in 1988; and a PhD in health care management from the University of New Mexico, USA, in 1999. He was a prolific writer, publishing more than one hundred scientific papers on TB and HIV/AIDS and acting as first author in over 50 papers. He was appointed Professor by the University of Malawi in 2006. On his return to Malawi after his tenure at KNCV, he was an advisor to the Malawi NTP and was then appointed Vice Chancellor of two private universities in the country – Shareworld Open University and Skyway University.

Felix leaves a wife, Gladys, and four children (two sons, Christopher and Steven, and two daughters, Clara and Gladys). The international and African TB community will miss him dearly as a friend, a colleague and a TB advocate. He will be remembered for his huge legacy in improving TB control for poor people, and for his inspiring personality and leadership.