

EIP

Dame Elizabeth Anionwu, Black History Month 2023

To celebrate Black History month and in keeping with the theme of 'Saluting Our Sisters', I have chosen to write about a woman who has made enormous contributions in the field of healthcare. Her efforts have been internationally recognised, resulting in her receiving numerous awards, including being appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE)^[1] in the 2001 Birthday Honours for her services to nursing. Dame Elizabeth Anionwu dedicated her career to sickle cell research and has pioneered numerous projects which have changed the lives of many. She was the UK's first sickle cell and thalassemia nurse specialist.

Dame Elizabeth Anionwu was born in Birmingham to an Irish mother and a Nigerian father in 1947. However, it was not long before she was placed in a children's home where she spent most of her early childhood. Elizabeth's dream to become a nurse began at the age of four, when she started to develop a great admiration for the 'sensitivity and kindness' of her own childhood nurse. This inspired her and at the age of sixteen, in pursuit of her dream, she applied to several teaching hospitals in London. Despite having good grades, she faced many disappointments as questions were always raised about her heritage and family background. At the time, it was rare to find Black nurses and she faced much discrimination. Eventually, she settled for a role as a school nurse, working for the NHS in Wolverhampton. These experiences helped shape Elizabeth and would later serve as motivation for several of her future projects.

Elizabeth enrolled at the University College London (UCL) where she focused her studies on sickle cell research. In 1988, she earned a PhD and later worked as a senior lecturer at the same university. Elizabeth went on to found a thalassaemia screening and counselling centre. It was not long before she founded the Sickle Cell Society. Throughout her career, Elizabeth remained very passionate about the struggles that

ethnic minorities faced. Much of her research and treatment was dedicated to these groups due to the significant underrepresentation of people from these groups in clinical and health research and substantial inequalities in health outcomes. Although there has been some progress, she notes that there is still more to be done, saying, “I’m not satisfied until other gaps in service for BME patients and health professionals are addressed”. Her efforts were recognised when she was appointed the head of the Mary Seacole Centre for Nursing Practices.

Dame Elizabeth Anionwu has encouraged many with her story. She achieved much within her professional field whilst also serving her community. Her work has changed lives and she is an inspiration to people from all backgrounds. Her research has been critical in helping to better understand sickle cell disease as well highlighting the difficulties that some marginalised groups face. You can find out more about Dame Elizabeth Anionwu here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Anionwu.

Written by Ellyna Ndaya

[1] When she reluctantly accepted the CBE, having turned down honours in the past, notably an MBE, in 1985, she received a congratulation card with the message: “I know you’re in two minds about all this, but what CBE stands for in your case is cool, black and exceptional.”