

# Keynote Address: Extreme Ownership, Professional Belonging, and the Unity of the Dental Fraternity

**Speaker:** Dr. Davji Bhimji Atallah, National Secretary General

**Event:** The Kenya Dentistry Awards 2025

**Date:** Tuesday, 23rd December 2025

**Venue:** Nairobi, Kenya

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## Distinguished Guests, Honored Awardees, Colleagues, and Friends,

As it has been protocol throughout the evening, my name is Dr. Davji Bhimji Atallah, and I serve as the National Secretary General for KMPDU. I know we have all been networking and celebrating for a short while now, but I want to bring an interesting observation to your attention. If you look closely at the list of honors tonight, the Kenya Dentistry Awards has conspicuously avoided giving an award to anyone representing the union executive. Do not worry; this is not an isolated event. The exact same thing happened last week during our annual assembly with the Kenya Medical Association—the KMPDU leadership went completely unawarded. And I know very well that tomorrow evening, on the 18th of this month, during the grand gala organized by the Pharmaceutical Society of Kenya, the union leadership will once again be left off the award roster.

There is a profound structural reason for this pattern. In this world, you only award individuals who have completed a singular task—those whose primary work is finished. But for those of us who are not yet finished, those who are mandated by history to continue pushing the heavy machinery of this union forward every single day, you do not give a metal plaque. Instead, you grant us our true vote of confidence by *not* awarding us. Our award is the uninterrupted work itself. However, I am confident that when we gather for the awards ceremony of 2031, even a blind person will see the monumental baseline that has been built across this decade and will recognize it. By that time, even the most detached skeptic will smell the sweetness of the structural work we are doing today, and everyone will clearly witness the fruits of what we are building together.

**"The great statesman John Quincy Adams famously wrote: 'If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, then you are a leader.' Tonight, looking out across this room, I have witnessed an extraordinary gathering of true leaders who have been rightfully honored in this space."**

I want to offer my warmest, most heartfelt congratulations to each and every awardee tonight. It is out of those precise, quiet actions that you execute daily in your clinics—and across the diverse professional spaces you occupy—that the entire landscape and standards of dentistry are being structurally transformed in this republic. Let us be completely honest with ourselves about our past isolation. Before this magnificent event, before looking through the official nomination forms, I personally only knew of two dental clinics in the entire country. If anyone called my office asking for a dental referral, I would automatically send them straight to Dr. Eric Odamo's clinic or to Dr. Malit's clinic. But walking through this room tonight, I have learned that every other part of this country, every single corner of this city, has dedicated professionals providing top-tier specialized care. This event has shattered our professional silos and created critical national awareness, which means we need many more gatherings exactly like this one.

I was listening closely to Dr. Che speaking on this stage earlier, flanked by a remarkably vibrant and flowery team. It is immediately clear that his entire team is deeply inspired by the cohesive way they work. We must remember that Dr. Che was one of the founding members of our union infrastructure, serving with dedication as the regional chairman for our Central Branch back in 2009. It is out of those foundational struggles in the union, and the work we continue to execute everywhere, that the immense social and professional influence we see in this room is generated. We have had many fine leaders helm the Kenya Dental Association, and we have had excellent minds in different regulatory spaces. But it took the relentless, sharp executive leadership of just six months under Dr. Kaamuna to achieve this inaugural, comprehensive national recognition of the dental fraternity in Kenya.

I have been informed by the organizers that not every practitioner in this hall tonight is a registered member of the KDA. Let us remember that tonight's event is for the entire dental fraternity of this country—especially for those who have felt unseen, unappreciated, and unrecognized by the broader state health apparatus. Therefore, my primary call to action to you tonight is very simple: **\*\*You need to belong.\*\*** You must actively belong to the Kenya Dental Association and to the union. It is only when you step inside the organization that you gain the power to actively shape the public health policies that govern your livelihood. It is only through that collective platform that we can systematically weed out and remove the dangerous quacks who currently bewilder our markets and degrade our professional standing. It is only when we unite as one unyielding block that we can ensure that malicious, watered-down pieces of legislation—bills engineered by outsiders to claim that under-qualified technicians can execute the precise, surgical work that you do—are permanently defeated and thrown out.

During the previous regulatory cycles before our internal elections, I stated firmly that it is an absolute institutional failure to have an oversight council where the KDA is technically represented, where the KMA sits, and yet that very council turns around to pass administrative resolutions that actively sabotage the economic and clinical sovereignty of our practitioners. As a union, we took a definitive, unyielding stand. We issued a clear national statement that we will never allow such structural betrayals to happen on our watch, and we blocked it. There are many

magnificent milestones that dentists have achieved across our history, but one area where you were absolutely spot on was electing leaders who are willing to stand on the front lines.

In his definitive treatise on leadership, *\*Extreme Ownership\**, the naval commander Jocko Willink outlines a profound reality that we must all internalize. He notes that **“there are no bad teams, only bad leaders.”** There is no collective group of professionals that we can look at and dismiss as a bad team. But we can certainly have a bad leader—and a bad leader is defined as someone who immediately looks downward to blame the members of their team the moment a crisis hits an organization. Conversely, a true leader is someone who assumes absolute, unconditional responsibility for all the structural failures within their house. I am emphasizing this because, for the first time, I am witnessing this dental fraternity democratically electing unyielding representatives to stand for you within the Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Council. What that means, colleagues, is that you are no longer just practitioners; you are the leadership.

Let us protect our unity, let us build our institutions, and let us take absolute ownership of our future.

Thank you very much, and enjoy the rest of your evening.

**Dr. Davji Bhimji Atallah**

National Secretary General, KMPDU

**VIVA KMPDU! VIVA!**