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**Professor
Thifhelimbilu
Irene
Munzhelele**



Here to be Altering

**Being the first, but making
sure she is not the last.**

Professor Thifhelimbilu Irene Munzhelele made history as South Africa’s first black female Maxillofacial and Oral Surgeon. Now, as a Head of Department, she is helping more women find their place in a specialty where they have historically been underrepresented.

Growing up in a village in Venda, Prof. Munzhelele became the first generation in her family to attend university. It was the beginning of a journey that would eventually see her break barriers in one of South Africa’s most specialised areas of healthcare.

Prof. Munzhelele went on to become South Africa’s first African female maxillofacial and oral surgeon, a specialty combining complex dental and surgical expertise. She is also the

first and only African person to qualify in the field with both dental and medical degrees.

After completing her dental degree at Medunsa, she continued her studies across oral surgery and medicine before qualifying as a specialist in Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery.

She later worked as a specialist for the South African Defence Force before moving further into academia and leadership. Today, Prof. Munzhelele is Head of the Department of Maxillofacial and Oral Surgery at Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, where she has become the first African female HOD in her specialty. The significance of that position extends beyond her own career.

Maxillofacial and oral surgery has traditionally been a male-dominated discipline in South Africa. The first woman in the country only qualified in the specialty in 1998, making the progress of women in the field relatively recent. Prof. Munzhelele is now using her position to help change this.

“I am very passionate about intentionally empowering other women,” she says. Since taking over as HOD, she has helped develop female maxillofacial and oral surgeons, resulting in more women continuing through the programme.

Her contribution goes beyond being the woman who reached the milestone first. By teaching, mentoring and creating.

Her contribution goes beyond being the woman who reached the milestone first. By teaching, mentoring and creating opportunities for others, she is helping ensure that women entering the profession today encounter a different environment from the one she experienced.

For a woman who began her journey as the first person in her family to access university education, that progress carries particular meaning. Prof. Munzhelele’s career has been filled with firsts, but the more important measure of her contribution will be her impact. She believes that every woman who qualifies as a maxillofacial and oral surgeon from hereon makes the specialty more achievable for the next generation.