



From the desk of the Women's Wing

A voice for women, leadership and balance

Dr Sisanda Mabude, SAMA WW

Dr Babalwa Maholwana is a distinguished healthcare executive, corporate strategist and author – with over 20 years of experience in the pharmaceutical and clinical research industries. She is a qualified medical doctor and holds a Master of Philosophy degree in corporate strategy, with expertise in sustainable leadership, strategic collaboration and competition.

Her career spans medical and executive roles in multinational pharmaceutical companies, including Servier, Pfizer, Novo Nordisk and Abbott – culminating in a former CEO role for a proudly SA medical research institute. Dr Maholwana has proven expertise in leading multidisciplinary teams responsible for groundbreaking clinical research, while driving sustainable organisational growth and innovation.

Beyond the technical corporate sphere, she is a coach, mentor and public speaker, and a passionate advocate for women in leadership and sustainable business transformation.

Through her thought leadership, she has contributed to global platforms, such as the GIBS Women as Leaders programme, alt_ed Winning Women programme and various medical research symposia and conferences.

Thought leadership

As the author of *The After-40 Dilemma*, Dr Maholwana explores the intersection of career, relationships, modern parenting and life purpose – offering insights on balance, wellbeing and navigating life's transitions with clarity and confidence. I caught up with her to chat about her book, the process and her vision for the future.

How did the transition happen from medicine to being an author, and what inspired you to write *The After-40 Dilemma*?

I had already made a few pivotal transitions in my career – from clinical research and pharmaceutical industry leadership to a Master's in corporate strategy. I was inspired to share this story as a student of life who



had finally embraced my imperfect path, as a gift worth sharing.

Was there a personal turning point in your own life that shaped the book's themes?

The book's core themes focus on our most pivotal life transitions – the dilemmas they pose, the choices we prioritise and their consequences – including the unforeseen tradeoffs. For example, I chose to become a single parent early in my career. This meant that I postponed any postgraduate ambitions, as I was already juggling parenting and a demanding career with extensive travel.

How do you define the "dilemma" people face after 40?

I view this as the simultaneous pull across multiple facets of life. At this age, we are likely to be caught between growing children and ailing parents, while – at least for women – we face another transition with our biological clocks. In my case, the dilemma was compounded by blended family dynamics and the longoverdue decision to pursue my Master's.

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Did you draw more from research, personal experience, or stories of others?

This memoir is my personal story, which I decided to tell in first-person narrative. I started writing as a process to

unpack and simplify my most intricate inner thoughts. I think that sharing some of these thoughts aloud makes the story more relatable.

How do cultural or societal expectations influence the dilemmas people face?

Based on my experience, these are the very expectations that deepen our dilemmas, by adding more complexity to and potentially clouding our decision-making. While my experience would later allow me to integrate who I am socioculturally, my core values remain my true north.

Did you find differences between men and women in how they experience this stage of life?

That's beyond the scope of the current book, as it is intentionally grounded in my lived experience. However, I have been challenged by some readers to consider a male perspective for a sequel.

Which chapter was the hardest for you to write, and why?

One of the climactic chapters in the book is titled "Burnout". This chapter was the hardest to write, as it forced me to trace the sequential events leading to my burnout experience. While writing was therapeutic for the most part, some memories were quite triggering.

Did you discover anything surprising about yourself while writing?

Only that I love writing more than most things. I just never gave myself permission to be a writer first, before other things.

What's next for you?

I still have more books in me. Given even more time to better my skill, I'll never stop writing.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Letters to the Editor page aims to give members the opportunity to comment on, query, complain or compliment on any matter, topic, incident, event or issue in their particular field or with regard to general healthcare, which you feel should be shared with your colleagues and fellow readers.

Please note that letters:

- should be no longer than 500 words
- can be published anonymously, but writer details must be submitted to the editor in confidence
- must be on subjects pertinent to healthcare delivery
- should be submitted before the 6th of the month in order to be published in the next issue of *SAMA Insider*.

Please email contributions to: Diane de Kock, dianed@samedical.org.

