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PROGRAM NAME: WOMANITY – WOMEN IN UNITY

**GUEST NAME: DR. JODY PEARL – NEUROLOGIST – SUNNINGHILL HOSPITAL
JOHANNESBURG**

SPEAKER	TRANSCRIPTION
DR. MALKA	Hello, I'm Dr. Amaleya Goneos-Malka, welcome to 'Womanity– Women in Unity'. The show that celebrates prominent and ordinary African Women's milestone achievements in their struggles for liberation, self-emancipation, human rights, democracy, racism, socio-economic class division and gender based violence.
DR. MALKA	Joining us on the line today, from Johannesburg, in our series on Women in Medicine, is Dr. Jody Pearl, who is a neurologist and runs a practice in Sunninghill Hospital in Johannesburg. Throughout her eighteen years of private practice she has seen almost twenty thousand patients. Welcome to the show Dr. Pearl!
DR. PEARL	Thank you Amaleya and thank you for this great opportunity, I've been reading some of the guests that you've had on this show and I feel extremely honoured and humbled by your invitation.
DR. MALKA	It's our pleasure and you are our first neurologist, so we look forward to hearing some of your lessons and learnings in the discussion today. To begin with, neurologists diagnose and treat disorders of the nervous system, whether that's the central nervous system, brain and spine, to the peripheral nervous system. Diseases that come to mind are the likes of Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, having a back injury or brain tumours and seizures; can you please share some insight into the types of conditions that you treat and diagnose?
DR. PEARL	I'm a general neurologist and so I treat all those conditions that you've mentioned, having said that, you know the brain is one of the most complex organs in the body and we know that there's still so much to be learned when it comes to brain and central nervous system function. To this day, an example is we don't even know why it is that we have to sleep and why we dream and there are just so many billions of neurons firing all at once. The brain is a difficult organ, some of the conditions that I see are rare and the general population may never have heard of them; Stiff Person Syndrome for example and, you know, some dementias which are not your typical Alzheimer's Dementia, Lewy Body Dementia, Neurosarcoidosis. I think what's happened to me over time is because I'm very pedantic about getting to the bottom of things and trying to find answers, I've ended up getting patients that have been to several other doctors around the country and they end up at me and so I have all these very difficult patients, sometimes I find the answer, sometimes not, but I think one of my greatest sort of attributes is that I enjoy information sharing and I'm only too happy to work with other neurologists and share information and insights in terms of coming to a diagnosis.
DR. MALKA	It sounds as though you work within this sort of network of a puzzle, for want of a better word, of trying to fit components together and identify the right types of solutions and when you talk about this dynamic of collaboration, every year we're seeing more and more advancements in many types of fields but particularly so within the medical sphere and I'd imagine that that also stimulates new opportunities or new treatments or new diagnoses and being able to improve healthcare of individuals.
DR. PEARL	Absolutely, you know I always say generally South African doctors are extremely good diagnosticians because we see so much all the time, from

	<p>the day that we step foot into the hospitals to train as mere fourth-year students and ongoing and because you see so much of everything I think that our clinical acumen is excellent. What we lack possibly is that super, super specialisation, for example if I look at what happens overseas, Cleveland Clinic for example and there they would run a headache clinic and there would be five or so specialists all together assessing one case. In one week I can assess thirty headache patients all on my own. So I think that South African doctors have great exposure and great experience, perhaps what we're lacking is very super specialised units.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>I would say that that also depends from an issue of capacity, of the number of people that individuals see and the ratio of doctors per patients and specialists. One question I wanted to ask you whilst we're on this topic specifically around neurology and different types of ailments and disorders; are there any neurological conditions that seem to impact women more so than men?</p>
DR. PEARL	<p>Most definitely, there are several conditions which are more common in women, for example headache disorders; migraine, which is a very debilitating disorder often under-recognised and under-treated; multiple sclerosis is another disorder and more common in women; young strokes. As we get older, you know, the general causes of stroke is in older populations being hypertension, diabetes etcetera, but in the younger population there is a female predominance and that is based perhaps on other risks, hormonal based risks, oral contraceptive, pregnancy, those type of things which are obviously unique to women and in fact something even like Alzheimer's disease seems to be more common in women. The other one which comes to mind is auto-immune diseases that have neurological complications, so an auto-immune disease is a disorder where your own body attacks healthy cells and those disorders tend to be more common in women and often have neurological manifestations, as well as other organ systems.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>And besides hormonal changes, what do you attribute to be some of the triggers that prompt the onset of neurological conditions in women?</p>
DR. PEARL	<p>So there's been a lot of work done, let's take a condition like multiple sclerosis, which is not hormonally based in any way, unlike for example migraine which we know has a hormonal link and there's been a lot of work to try and understand the biology behind why it's a condition that is more prevalent in women. There were some publications recently that perhaps a woman's brain has a different protein at the interface between the blood and the brain, which we call the blood brain barrier, almost a gatekeeper protein, which allows more permeability in the brain, you know we don't even know what causes MS, we know it's in auto-immune based but it's one of those conditions, there's no specific cause. Another interesting fact, talking about multiple sclerosis, is that there were large differences in numbers of multiple sclerosis in different ethnic groups, it's only now that the numbers for example in African and Hispanic patients is on the increase, so there must be some environmental trigger at play as well. Historically we didn't even believe that multiple sclerosis occurred in African patients and that is no longer the case, but neurological disorders are often difficult in that the brain is not an organ that can easily be biopsied and it's very different from for example a skin disorder, in skin disorders you can take a little biopsy and you get an answer because you get it sent off to a laboratory and a printout. With the brain, you know, you're looking at either a scan which shows structure, the electrical function which is what we call an EEG, but we have no way of measuring brain chemistry, you know, and proteins and it's difficult.</p>

	<p>Where you can biopsy tumours for example, that's fine, but just to take a patient to biopsy brain matter is really difficult. You know there are conditions which are common and we learn in medicine from early on that common things occur commonly, which means that when patients present you've got to look at the commonest conditions, you know, there are only a subset of patients which have these very rare and difficult neurological disorders, but medicine is ever changing and evolving and there are new disorders that are coming to light, you know over time, I'll give you an example, there's something called functional neurological disorders. Now that's a very interesting disorder in that patients present with various neurological signs and symptoms and no matter how hard you look, there is no underlying medical reason for it, so what we call no organic cause and those disorders were initially thought to be part of the psychiatric spectrum, that's now changed and these disorders have been moved to the neurological classification in the worldwide classification of medical disorders.</p>
	<p>AD BREAK</p>
<p>DR. MALKA</p>	<p>Today we're talking to Neurologist, Dr. Jody Pearl, in our series on Women in Medicine. We would love to receive your comments on Twitter: @WomanityTalk.</p>
<p>DR. MALKA</p>	<p>You've seen over twenty thousand patients to date, that is just a phenomenal number and thinking about this dynamic, it's not just looking at aspects from a patient perspective, but these people all have families, so that's twenty thousand families that you have been taking care of their loved ones and your patients span the breadth of the continent, from Nigeria to Mozambique to Zimbabwe, Malawi, Ghana, Kenya; please can you share with us a couple of success stories which really stand out for you?</p>
<p>DR. PEARL</p>	<p>One of the stories that comes to mind first is actually years ago when I had recently started in private practice and I was actually seven months pregnant with twins, I was called to a young stroke patient and I remember standing at the foot of his bed, he was in his late thirties, a very fit individual and I remember standing at the edge of the bed and thinking should I give him clot busters, we call them clot busters, in medical terms they're called thrombolytics, they're there to dissolve a clot to try and restore blood-flow as early as possible and it wasn't something that was in the South African Neurological Stroke Guidelines at that time, but they were available because they were being used for heart attacks, you know, to dissolve the clot and I obviously had been reading up, as I do all the time, try and keep up-to-date and I was faced with this difficult decision and, you know, he was accompanied by some colleagues who said, you know, we know this man, he would want you to do everything you can because the stroke was so large that he probably wouldn't have walked or talked again and he is now all this time later, I mean he is extremely fit, he trains, you can maybe hear occasionally a little stutter but he had absolute complete recovery and I'll never forget him because it was one of my first sort of success stories, but it didn't come without question and you know to an extent I had to be brave in making that decision. Another story which comes to mind which touches my heart greatly is one of the cleaning kitchen staff at the hospital, she came to me one day and she said to me please can I see her daughter who developed epilepsy and eleven years old, she was a normal child up until then and she, you know, she was fitting all the time and going every month to the clinic to get the same medication and really wasn't functional at all, she in fact was mentally impaired as a result of having all these seizures and, you know, this mom</p>

	<p>who worked in the kitchen there had to have someone, other family members look after her, at that stage she was...by the time I saw her she was already in her twenties and you know it took me about eight months to get the medicine cocktail right and, you know, for the last I think nearly going on almost ten years she's been seizure-free and in fact one of the greatest sort of moments I'll remember is when she walked into the office with her mom and she was working as a hostess now in one of the wards at Sunninghill Hospital, the hostesses you know help with sort of giving out food and talking to patients and that; she was so proud of herself.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>It must be such a rewarding experience of the impact that you have on people's lives, that they're able to...</p>
DR. PEARL	<p>...to have a life of sorts...</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>...to have that life back. Now you've recently returned from a visit to Nigeria and one of the plans I understand underway is to be building up neurology capacity in the country by setting up a neurology centre; please tell us how this initiative came about?</p>
DR. PEARL	<p>So this is very interesting, I actually I'm a firm believer in, as the old adage goes, "things happen for a reason". In 2018 I was on call at Sunninghill Hospital and I was informed that there was a VIP coming in from Nigeria and no-one could really give a time, he was being flown in, and I waited patiently, you know, I wanted to get home to my family but ended up staying there most of the night and this particular patient had had a stroke a couple of weeks before, being air-evacuated to South Africa and you know I went about my normal business in terms of looking after him as I do any other patient, I really didn't even know who he was at the time and subsequently learned that this man was a very well-known humanitarian and philanthropist in Nigeria, he is known as the Esama of the universe, according to the Nigerian folk, and what he has done is he has built schools and sub-stations for electricity and he has a hospital and a university with a medical school that he built in Okada City where he was born in poverty and what struck me about this man was he was...his gratitude and his determination to go back to absolutely normal full function at the age of eighty-three the stroke happened, which he has done, he has overcome and what struck me was that here is an extremely wealthy man who has access to practically anything and everyone, but there he was in a hospital, which he himself had built for the people, and they weren't able to offer him the kind of care, basic stroke care, that we were able to offer. It kind of plagued me to think that there is so much that can be done and it's not complicated medicine, it's just about having the right direction and so I went to visit him at his behest, he wanted to present me with an award in Nigeria and I visited this hospital and the medical school and we have embarked on a journey that I will help to educate some of the specialists there and set up a unit that is functionally practical, so not so much academics, what people need is they need practical training in order to practice basic emergency medicine in the field of neurology.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>It's a fantastic initiative that you're doing and you have this ethos of almost paying things forward, of being able to give back, which I think is such a wonderful attribute to possess.</p>
DR. PEARL	<p>Thank you.</p>
	<p style="text-align: center;">AD BREAK</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>Today we're talking to Neurologist Dr. Jody Pearl in our series on Women in Medicine. We would love to receive your comments on</p>

	Twitter: @WomanityTalk.
DR. MALKA	We've spoken about the work that you do and you've highlighted some fantastic examples of different cases and the positive outcomes. Turning towards let's say eighteen years plus ago, when you ...
DR. PEARL	...yes...
DR. MALKA	...were starting out; why did you pursue a career in medicine and what gave you a mind to channel your specialisation into neurology?
DR. PEARL	It's an interesting question, I think that one of the things, you know, when I was young my late grandmother was misdiagnosed with a psychiatric illness when in fact she had young onset Alzheimer's disease. She presented with cognitive and psychiatric symptoms in her fifties and ended up, I'll never forget as a child going to visit her in institutions such as Tara which is a, you know, a unit here in Johannesburg, it's a state run unit and an excellent unit, but eventually it became blatantly obvious that she had young onset Alzheimer's disease. My mother had spent many years of anguish, you know, as to no-one being able to give them answers as to what was happening and why she was so impaired, that is one of the things I think that comes to mind. The other thing is is that I feel that medicine is a calling, I always wanted to be a doctor, I don't think that I ever thought of doing anything else and I was determined, having said that, there was something difficult choices I had to make and I think that young people, especially young women, to have to make certain career choices at the tender age of seventeen is not easy. I applied around the country and was accepted at multiple universities and then I had to decide where I was going to go, I was really torn between leaving my family and going to UCT or Stellenbosch or Pretoria University or just staying and praying that I would get into Wits and I must say if it wasn't because of the commitment of my mother in pursuing the response from Wits University, I may not have ended up in medicine.
DR. MALKA	There's nothing like the power of a mother, I have heard so many stories of moms invested into their children to really make sure that they realise their dreams.
DR. PEARL	Absolutely, I think that is one of the key factors. I believe as women, whether it's as mothers or aunts or you know, or just women in general, one of the key factors in encouraging and helping the youth and the women of the future to do great things and to be recognised and to excel, is to teach them from a very young age that they are important, that if they have a voice they will have a choice and that they should be acknowledged and they should be encouraged and they should be praised.
DR. MALKA	You spoke about medicine being a calling and that was your, you know, in your mind and in your view you couldn't be anything else other than a doctor; we know that in South Africa that we are under-represented in terms of the ratio of doctors to citizens, there was a study done in 2013 which noted that in South Africa there were sixty doctors per hundred thousand citizens, but the world average was a hundred and fifty-two doctors per a hundred thousand citizens at the time. In this case we're really not going to dwell into the myriad of reasons on why this is, but from your perspective, do you think enough is being done to encourage or help women to pursue a career in medicine?
DR. PEARL	I don't think enough is being done, I think there is this misconception that perhaps medicine is a male dominated field and that it is more difficult for women to excel in medicine and, you know, women have other responsibilities perhaps when it comes to family and home responsibilities that maybe men don't have, but I believe that if there were women like

	<p>myself and like this show that were able to show those out there that it's possible to have everything if you're prepared to work for it. I'm a very firm believer in hard work and dedication, I don't believe that anything that I have or that I have achieved has just come to me, I believe that I've worked very hard for it and I do think that, you know, if a woman is prepared to work hard and has the right support structure, then going into medicine is a great career choice, the problem is it's quite difficult to get into medicine sometimes and I think there are a lot of people who want to do medicine, they just cannot get in.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>Staying for a moment on this notion of being able to have everything if you put in the right amount of work, if you also have the enabling environment from a support structure and network system; you're successful at the job that you do, you have three children and manage to keep everything running and together; what's your winning formula?</p>
DR. PEARL	<p>So I think my winning formula is that I've surrounded myself with people that help those structures run smoothly, it's a very nurturing environment so both at home and at my office, all my staff have been with me since the beginning, which is now eighteen years and I don't run the practice or my home as if, you know, I'm the boss or I'm the employer and those are employees, we run like a family, so every person who is in my life plays a very significant role and I realised that I would not be where I am without the support of all of those people. I also have very supportive parents, my mother and father have been extremely dedicated to me and my mother in fact was working in my practice for many years until she recently became ill and I have great children, they're very independent, I have regrets where I feel that perhaps I missed too many soccer games or netball matches or award ceremonies, but on the other side I see that my children have grown up into very independent, empathic, well-rounded individuals and I have a partner who is also very supportive. I do think though I have very little reserve capacity, so if something else happens, that is an extra stress on me, I do sometimes feel like I'm going to tumble, you know, I do hit a period where I feel it's too much, it's just too much because I run at a hundred percent all the time.</p>
DR. MALKA	<p>How do you replenish yourself when your levels run down?</p>
DR. PEARL	<p>I think that for me work and my patients and doing good things for people is what feeds me my dopamine, which is our reward chemical and I have a system where I perform random acts of kindness, so if I'm feeling a little bit run down or burnt out I will endeavour to do something good for someone and it may not be in the medical field for example and that makes me feel good. So, you know, some people say they need to be away from work and take time off and it's helping people and speaking to my patients and hearing their stories and, you know, seeing them go from struggling to being happy and successful, that helps me to replenish. I do sometimes take time out and during that time I feel that I should try and shut down a little bit but I've mastered a form of, I think it's meditation, where I can just lie on a Saturday or a Sunday for an hour and think nothing, so I am able to clear my brain completely that I can think about nothing for a couple of hours and that then replenishes me. My daughter is highly intelligent and she's highly analytic and she thinks, I said you need to learn to turn off your brain, she said I don't know how to do that, I said it's a skill, I've learned it over many years, I can literally sit or lie with my eyes closed and think nothing. I'm not a worrier, I don't sit and worry, I don't...I just think nothing, but somehow, somewhere the answers or clues just pop into my actions, so I think I am thinking but I'm</p>

	not consciously...
DR. MALKA	...conscious...
DR. PEARL	...thinking.
DR. MALKA	AD BREAK
DR. MALKA	Today we're talking to Neurologist Dr. Jody Pearl in our series on Women in Medicine. We would love to receive your comments on Twitter: @WomanityTalk.
DR. MALKA	Thanks for sharing some of the aspects in the way that you look at being able to restore things, from being able to replenish your energy levels in a case of being able to almost flip the mental switch off and take the time out. We're coming towards the end of the show now and a question I wanted to ask is about your personal journey and some of the factors that you consider have contributed to your success.
DR. PEARL	So I think that I have evolved over years to realise that the most important thing for me is who I am as a person, it's not what I achieve on paper or what accolades I have, it's so that when I look in the mirror I am happy with who I see, that I know that I have given a hundred percent of my best to my family, to my patients. I know that there are many mistakes that I have made and I have learned to be able to take criticism and I like to improve myself and I feel that it hasn't been an easy journey, there have been many times in my life where I've had, you know, obstacles or times when I've gone through difficulties, but I move forward and I really I would like to believe that we all have the capacity to try and move forward and believe that, you know, if we make the right choices and we listen to that little voice in your head or look for some spiritual guidance, that the answers are out there and we can find them.
DR. MALKA	Who would you say have been some of the key female role models or influences in your life?
DR. PEARL	So I think that in terms of my neurological practice, Professor Vivienne Fritz was a great inspiration to me, she was the head of neurology previously, she is retired, she's a wonderful woman and she, you know, I did neurology very quickly; it sounds strange but I wrote my exams very close together and I managed to finish at a very young age and I think that she was key in all of that. She supported me and I think that she saw something in me that led me to where I am today. I would like to think that all of the people that looked after me through my years, from the time I was young and obviously my mother and our helper, even at that stage, I think that you know all the women who play small roles in fact are probably my greatest inspiration, I don't even have this great role model. I think that sometimes we miss this, people who maybe are not doctors and lawyers and government officials, the people that are just there, that surround us and make our lives possible and pleasant every day, those are the people that I feel are my role models. I mean when I get to work in the morning I am happy to see the lady from the cleaning service who is cleaning my office and she's happy to see me and I think that, you know, the biggest key factor is to recognise that there are so many beautiful people around us and they don't necessarily have to be what we consider to be highly accomplished, famous role models.
DR. MALKA	I'm getting a mental image of, you know, there's often on some presentations they'll kind of like have a life analogy where they'll put in rocks, which represent key milestones and then they'll put in sand and slowly the substrate gets smaller and smaller and then they'll either pour in a bottle of water or a beer and it's like it's the glue, it's the sum of the parts which in the way that you're talking about some of the ladies that have been part of your life and still

	are today, that they are what makes life.
DR. PEARL	Absolutely, absolutely, for me those are the people who allow me to do what I do best and that's to treat patients, I honestly believe that and that's how I feel, you know, I feel that everyone is important and I try and show that in some small way or another, you know, I don't see that I am better or more superior to someone who serves the tea at my office, because we are a unit and that unit is there to provide the best healthcare possible to as many people as possible.
DR. MALKA	And on that wonderful note, as we close out today's discussion in honour of Mandela Day, please can you share a few words of wisdom or inspiration that you'd like to pass onto girls and women in Africa that are listening to the show?
DR. PEARL	I'd just like to say that I think that self-belief is one of the key factors, I think that if you believe in yourself and you are prepared to work hard that there are many opportunities in life even though we don't always see them and I think that the greatest thing we can give to the youth and our children is the support to follow their dreams and whatever that may be, whether we believe that it's in their best interest or not, to do something that will fulfil them so that when they look back at their lives they feel that I have had a good life, that I have done something good.
DR. MALKA	Thanks for that wonderful message of inspiration. It's been a pleasure having you on the show today.
DR. PEARL	Thank you and thank you for having me and it's an incredible show and I wish you great luck going forward and I think that you have done a great thing.
DR. MALKA	Thank you very much we appreciate that and really, you've hit your twenty thousand milestone, let's look forward to the next twenty thousand patients and the next eighteen years.
DR. PEARL	Please God, please God, thank you.
DR. MALKA	Thank you so much for joining us today, it's been a pleasure having you on the show.
DR. PEARL	Thank you and it's been an absolute pleasure and I wish all of my fellow South Africans and Africans all the best during this difficult time and during the Covid crises and just to know that the doctors are out there and we want to help and I think to my colleagues who are on the frontline, a special blessing to all of them.
DR. MALKA	Thanks for that important message, yes, stay safe.
	PROGRAMME END