Malawi celebrates its three newly qualified psychiatrists

For the first time in a generation, Malawi has new psychiatrists

This is a great personal achievement for Dr Olive Liwimbi, Dr Kazione Kulisewa and Dr Chipiliro Kadzongwe and a significant milestone for mental health in Malawi. Dr Liwimbi is also the first Malawian woman to become a psychiatrist and the first of the three to graduate formally at the University of Malawi last week. Dr Kulisewa and Kadzongwe are due to attend their graduation ceremonies in March 2018.

Still there is much more to do. The new graduates will bring the total number of full time psychiatrists in the country to just five, two of whom are not Malawian. That is one psychiatrist for every 4.5 million people in the country, the worst ratio of psychiatric doctors to population in southern Africa, and one of the worst on the continent.

Mental illness is one of Malawi’s most neglected and underfunded public health problems, receiving less than one per cent of the annual health budget. While data for Malawi is limited, it is clear that in sub-Saharan Africa, depression and other severe mental illnesses, plus alcohol and substance misuse, contribute greatly to the overall burden of disease - far more so in fact than heart disease or cancer.

Although mental illness is treatable and many of those suffering can lead full and productive lives, the majority in Malawi do not get the help they need. Whilst psychiatric nurses and clinical officers are well trained and able to provide most of the clinical care, many are deployed outside mental health services and clinical outreach into rural communities is often poor. The result is not only great individual difficulty and disability, but also a significant reduction in economic productivity that places a heavy burden on families and the state.

Drs Liwimbi, Kulisewa and Kadzongwe qualified after four years of specialty training. They completed their postgraduate qualification at the College of Medicine, Blantyre in collaboration with the Department of Psychiatry and Mental Health, University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa and supported by the Scotland Malawi Mental Health Education Project (SMMHEP) – a Scottish Government-funded charity run by volunteer psychiatrists. The charity is funding the training of four more Malawian psychiatrists over the next six years.

The three graduates follow in the footnote of Malawi’s only other psychiatrist, Dr Felix Kauye. Dr Kauye was director of clinical services at Zomba Mental Hospital before moving to the UK from where he continues to support Malawian clinicians and researchers as a mentor.
The new consultants now work alongside psychiatric nurses and clinical officers in the regional mental health units and outpatient clinics. Beyond their clinical work, they will help train primary care clinicians to provide better care for those struggling with mental health problems. Together these three young consultants will also assist in the training of four more Malawian psychiatrists - thereby doubling the total number of Malawian psychiatrists again.

Dr Liwimbi commented: “‘Why Psychiatry?’ is a question people have asked me for many years. ‘Why not psychiatry?’, I answer back. There is immense joy in seeing a client that was mentally unwell improve and function in society, contrary to what most people expect.

With a great team of psychiatric nurses and clinical officers that form the backbone of mental health services in Malawi, I look forward to complimenting their efforts and bringing mental health issues to greater heights in Malawi.”

Dr Kulisewa said: ‘We hope to impact the Mental Health of Malawians positively, by increasing awareness, improving access to Psychiatric services and reducing the stigma that has traditionally been associated with psychiatric disorders.’

Their graduation coincides with another exciting development for mental health in Malawi: the Wellcome Trust-funded African Mental Health Research Initiative (AMARI), which is due to hold its annual scientific meeting in Lilongwe in March. This provides scholarships, leadership training and mentoring for young Malawian mental health researchers. Through their studies, these researchers are looking for answers to locally relevant questions about mental health and substance misuse disorders. These scientists are working alongside colleagues from South Africa, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe to create a research collaboration network that will create knowledge and data to help improve mental health care in Sub-Saharan Africa through service improvement and policy change.

Dr Mwapatsa Mipando, COM’s principal remarked: “Congratulations to Dr Kulisewa and Dr Liwimbi, the current and former faculty of the Mental Health department, and all concerned partners for this giant leap towards the improvement of Mental Health services in Malawi. COM is proud to be involved in the production of these first home grown psychiatrists who are globally competent whilst being locally relevant. It’s a fulfilment of COM’s aspiration to be a socially accountable institution that is responsive to the health needs of our country and the nation. We look forward to utilising Dr Kulisewa and Dr Liwimbi in both our undergraduate and postgraduate training, and in relevant research activities.”

Responding to the new graduates’ success, the chair of the training committee for Psychiatry at UCT, Dr Pete Milligan commented: “We are delighted to have had the opportunity to support the training of psychiatrists for Malawi. This initiative is aligned with the University of Cape Town’s vision of supporting clinical training in Southern Africa. Warm congratulations to both candidates.” Professor Dan Stein, head of department of Psychiatry & Mental Health at UCT added: “I am absolutely delighted that the collaboration between the University of Malawi and the University of Cape Town has led to the successful graduation of Drs Liwimbi and Kulisewa in psychiatry. This is an important step forwards to building the human resources we need to tackle the burden of mental disorder in Malawi and other African countries.”
Dr Felix Kauye commented: "Congratulations to Kaz and Olive on completing their specialist training in Psychiatry. Also congratulations to the College of Medicine in Malawi for producing the first graduates in Psychiatry in the history of the College. I wish Kaz and Olive all the best as they embark on an exciting journey of working as psychiatrists in Malawi. They will find that fellow mental health professionals in Malawi are very supportive and this helps in making the work manageable."

Associate professor, Chiwoza Bandawe, Malawi’s only clinical psychologist based at the College of Medicine commented: “(Their) success ... marks a watershed in the development of mental health in Malawi. They come in to write the future of mental health service delivery in the country. Their passion, commitment and dedication to mental health is commendable and gives hope for the mental well being of the nation. We are reminded that there can be no health without mental health and their coming on board is a key ingredient in the development of health in the country generally.”

Dr Robert Stewart, trustee of the Scotland-Malawi Mental Health Education Project (SMMHEP) commented: “The graduation of Olive and Kaz is a great achievement. SMMHEP is delighted to have been able to support the College of Medicine to reach this milestone. We are excited about our ongoing collaboration in the Scotland-Malawi Psychiatry Capacity Development Project, a 6-year programme that will train a further 4 Malawian psychiatrists. We also look forward to working with Olive, Kaz and Chipi in continuing the teaching of psychiatry to the undergraduate MBBS students thus ensuring that all doctors in Malawi have skills in mental health care. We are very grateful to the Scottish Government who have funded the collaboration between COM and SMMHEP”

Mrs Immaculate Chamangwana, director of mental health services and director of the Southern Region’s mental health hospital in Zomba said: “The Ministry of Health is committed to provide comprehensive and quality mental health services to all men, women, boys and girls accessing mental health services at all levels of service delivery. One major problem affecting the delivery of mental health services in the country is lack of adequate and well-trained mental health professionals. It is very much pleasing to note the coming in of Dr O. Liwimbi and Dr K. Kulisewa who have completed their training program. This is a milestone in terms of mental health service delivery as their experience and expertise will go a long way and benefit a lot of lives of individuals with mental health disorders in the country.”