

A Deeper Look..... looking into the lives of people and projects that are making a difference in Malawi.....

Civic education is a necessity if medical research is to improve in the country

Kenneth Phiri is a research governance officer at Malawi-Liverpool Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Programme he talks to Thengo Kavinya about his profession



Research governance is a broad range of regulations, principles and good practices that have been put in place to achieve and improve health care research. It covers science, ethics, management, setting up and reporting of research that is aimed at improving human health. Kenneth Phiri is the Research Governance Officer at Malawi-Liverpool-Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Programme at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital and explains more.

Kenneth has always had an interest in medical discovery. Because of this ambition, Kenneth opted for sciences when he went to the university. He graduated from Chancellor College in 1998 with a Bachelor of Science degree majoring in chemistry. "I have always had an interest in medical discovery, that's why I studied chemistry so that I could apply it in this field. After graduating I couldn't secure a job in any of the handful of pharmaceutical companies in the country so I took up a teaching post at Lilongwe Private School." He later got a job at Parenterals Malawi Ltd, a pharmaceutical company in Lilongwe where he felt he could apply his chemistry knowledge. The company however closed down and he went back to teaching, this time at Central High School. "I knew it would not be easy to realize my dream so I packed my small bag and left for England where I picked up a job as a Clinical Trials Scientist at Richmond Pharmacology, a clinical trials company in London". Kenneth then obtained a Masters degree in clinical research at Cranfield University in England.

Kenneth came back to Malawi in 2009 to work at Malawi-Liverpool-Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Programme at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital as an enforcer of

research laws and regulations. He reveals that there has been tremendous improvement in research in the country. "Research in the country has improved greatly that I believe in a few years time we will reach European standards". He reveals that the major obstacle is high illiteracy levels among the majority of those that go to public hospitals where most of the research takes place. "It is not always easy to sell the idea of research to a parent of a very sick child. For example, telling a parent or guardian of a very sick child that with their permission, and in addition to the standard treatment protocol, you would like to take an extra two millilitres of blood (small as this may be) from their very sick child every day for the next five days, and that the exercise may not benefit their child but could benefit other children in future or that you would like to give their child an experimental combination of medications." Kenneth says some form of civic education is a needed if medical research is to improve in the country. "Research institutions should take research to people. They can do this by working with radio or television stations to have a special programme where they tell listeners of their work and how this work has contributed to the health sector for the past few years. They can also arrange to visit high and secondary school in a form of career talk, or put posters in hospitals or health centers or even buy spaces in the print media where they talk of their contributions to the health sector".

Kenneth reveals that his job can sometimes be challenging as it involves meeting new researchers who have little knowledge of research etiquette and or old timers who have to be told that things have changed, all this to ensure that all research is done following local and international regulations. "I have to explain the procedures that are to be followed when new researchers are planning to do a study, go through their proposals, conduct clinical audits, that means going through all the documentation, talk to research participants or their guardians, research staff, inspect research wards in the wards and to make sure they have consent from participants who are taking part in the research". He also gives training on Good Clinical Practices, policies and guidelines on ethical conduct of research.

During his free time Kenneth likes reading novels. He has also written a number of short stories and poems in the local papers and magazines and also in BBC Focus on Africa magazine. He says his main ambition is to see research in the country being the same level as in Europe in terms of quality and deliverables. He is now planning to study for a PhD in clinical research management in the near future.

Kenneth is a registered member of UK's Institute of Clinical Research. Apart from Richmond Pharmacology in London, Kenneth has also worked for Pharmaceutical Profiles, a clinical trials company in Nottingham, England.