

# Gender distribution of students and staff at the University of Malawi College of Medicine, 1991 - 2003

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**To the Editor:** The history of Malawi's only medical school, the College of Medicine of the University of Malawi, has been described elsewhere.<sup>1,3</sup> The purpose of its establishment was to produce medical doctors to meet the health care needs of Malawi and the southern African region. To date, the medical school has accepted students from Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Malawi. The doctor/patient ratio in Malawi is 1:46 000. Most of the clinical consultation is done by clinical officers and medical assistants.

The entry requirements for medical training in Malawi are: at least six O-level credit passes including English and mathematics, and three A-level passes with a grade of at least a C in chemistry and biology and in any science subject(s), e.g. physics and mathematics. Normally, passes in chemistry and biology at A-level are compulsory, and English and mathematics, if not offered at A-level, must have been passed at O-level. Alternatively, the student must have at least six Malawi school certificate of education credit passes including



English and mathematics and passes at credit level in chemistry and biology and any other science subjects, e.g. physics or mathematics or statistics at the end of year 2 in the Faculty of Science or Faculty of Education (Science) at Chancellor College, University of Malawi, or equivalent qualifications approved by the College.

In its efforts to reduce poverty in the country, the Malawi government has proposed female empowerment through education and the taking up of decision-making roles in all sectors of society. Generally, in the health sector, doctors are *de facto* leaders in the health care delivery services.

The number of female medical students and doctors continues to rise in many countries such as North America and Israel.<sup>4,5</sup> This has important ramifications insofar as career choice is concerned.<sup>6</sup> A study by Lambert *et al.*<sup>7</sup> reported that women doctors in the UK were more likely to choose a career in general practice than in other specialties. Cross-cultural studies have also shown that women medical doctors show more humanistic and personalised care.<sup>5</sup> The recruitment of female medical students is likely to be of interest to health services planners.

This study was undertaken to determine to what extent women were being prepared to take up decision-making roles as medical doctors. The study utilised official University of Malawi records. The gender distribution of students, graduates and faculty is presented in Tables I - III.

## Discussion

Medical training and the medical profession are essentially male-dominated areas in Malawi. The reasons for such a situation require further study. However, the entry requirements for medical training, which include high performance in science subjects, could be part of the reason, as many girls do not choose these subjects at secondary school level. The current situation could also be self-perpetuating in that potential female students may lack female role models<sup>8</sup> as there are currently only a few women doctors.

There is a need for follow-up work on this trend in medical schools. When the current status should be aggressively challenged should be a matter for consideration by medical educationalists.

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**Table I. Enrolment status of medical students at the University of Malawi College of Medicine, 2003**

Year of study	Males (as % of total enrolment in that year of study)	Females (as % of total enrolment in that year of study)	Total
1	46 (68.7)	21 (31.3)	67
2	16 (55.2)	13 (44.8)	29
3	14 (93.3)	1 (6.7)	15
4	12 (66.7)	6 (33.3)	18
5	16 (80.0)	4 (20.0)	20
Total	104 (69.8)	45 (30.2)	149 (100.0)

**Table II. Gender distribution of graduates at the University of Malawi College of Medicine, 1992 - 2002**

Year of graduation	Males (% of total for that year)	Females (% of total for that year)	Total
1992	12 (92.3)	1 (7.7)	13
1993	17 (89.5)	2 (10.5)	19
1994	12 (60.0)	8 (40.0)	20
1995	14 (77.8)	4 (22.2)	18
1996	13 (86.7)	2 (13.3)	15
1997	9 (75.0)	3 (25.0)	12
1998	18 (90.0)	2 (10.0)	20
1999	13 (72.2)	5 (27.8)	18
2000	7 (43.8)	9 (56.2)	16
2001	13 (76.5)	4 (23.5)	17
2002	16 (94.1)	1 (5.9)	17
Total	144 (79.6)	41 (20.4)	181

**Table III. Distribution of teaching staff according to gender and grade at the University of Malawi College of Medicine**

	Female (as % of total for that category)	Male (as % of total for that category)	Total
Associate professor and professor	3 (12.5)	21 (87.5)	24
Senior lecturer	2 (22.2)	7 (77.8)	9
Lecturer	1 (6.3)	15 (93.7)	16
Assistant lecturer	1 (4.8)	20 (95.2)	21
Staff associate	1 (33.3)	2 (66.7)	3
Total	8 (11.0)	65 (89.0)	73

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