

Women in healthcare

a Malawi doctor's experience

In March, RCP Global celebrated International Women's Day by sharing the upcoming launch of the new Global Women Leaders Programme, developed to encourage and support women in healthcare around the world to unleash their potential by advancing in their careers. **Dr Tamara Phiri** is a consultant and specialist physician at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital and Kamuzu University of Health Sciences in Malawi. She is the founding president of the Malawi College of Physicians and training director of the East, Central and Southern Africa College of Physicians (ECSACOP) training programme in Malawi. Here she shares her experience of being a woman in medicine and the challenges she has had to navigate to progress in her career.

What inspired you to become a doctor?

I have always been fascinated by the science of the human body. Growing up, I did not have doctors to look up to among my family or acquaintances, but my parents were supportive of my ambition and academic interests.

There is a severe shortage of doctors in Malawi. The World Health Organization estimates that there are 0.5 doctors for every 10,000 people. I saw medicine as an opportunity to make a difference to the community.

I enjoy being able to make a positive impact and difference during what can be a very challenging and frightening time in a person's life. I have now been qualified for 14 years and I still find my daily work fascinating.

As a female doctor, who has helped to inspire you? What barriers have you faced?

Before I began my medical training, there weren't many women in medicine, and even fewer in leadership positions. When I qualified, the main hospital theatre had two changing rooms – one had a sign that said 'doctors' changing room' and the other read 'nurses' changing room'. It was obvious that the doctors' changing room was for men and the nurses' changing room was for women. They hadn't anticipated women being doctors when the hospital was built. It has taken several decades to start changing stereotypes like this.

I have been fortunate to have been mentored by several exceptional physicians throughout my journey, including the late Professor Bongani Mayosi, who was the head of internal medicine at the University of Cape Town when I did my specialist training there. He modelled how to be an exceptional physician and academic, and how to be humble and kind. Professor Henry Mwandumba, deputy director of the Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Trust, modelled how to be thorough and brilliant at what you



do. Professor Johnstone Kumwenda showed me how to be a great teacher and have a never-ending passion for patients. Professor Ed Zijlstra showed me how to be a gentle but astute physician. He trained me as an undergraduate student and wrote a clinical handbook that came out when I was starting my clinical training. I have grown from being his student to co-editor of his book and we have worked on two editions together. Finally, I was mentored by Professor Theresa Allain, who was the head of medicine in my department during my undergraduate and postgraduate training. Her ward rounds were so rich. Seeing the same patients every day, there was little you could do because there were so few investigations and treatment options available. She had a way of thinking about each patient and always managed to consider another important factor that another doctor might have forgotten about.

Most of my mentors were men, which shows that

ECSACOP

Six countries make up the East, Central and Southern Africa College of Physicians



we need more women as leaders and role models for younger generations. Of course, there have been barriers along the way. In many places, I have been stereotyped for being black, female or young. I learned that commitment and the quality of your work speak and open doors for you. Eventually, everyone wants people who make things happen on their team, and if you are that person, opportunities will come your way.

Why is it important for more women to choose a career in medicine?

Exceptional women bring unique value to the medical field. I don't think it's a competition of the sexes – every field needs people who get work done. I'm pleased that there have been vast improvements over time, including many more women progressing into higher education. Institutions now operate a deliberate policy to allow fair numbers of both male and female students to access medical schools. This movement, therefore, enables more women to graduate and become doctors. However, as they progress through their careers, there is still a long way to go to keep changing perceptions.

For example, when I work on the wards, patients often assume I am a nurse. When I explain that I am a doctor and in a senior position, they are taken aback because culturally they don't believe this to be a women's role.

I've been fortunate to have progressed a lot in my career, and now hold senior leadership roles academically and clinically. There is, however, still a vast amount of education to be done in this area. The more women who join the profession and deliver, the better the perceptions will be.

I'm proud to see women mobilising themselves too. In Malawi, women are not appointed into senior roles as often as men. I noticed that a group of women with the required skills to perform these roles independently mobilised themselves and created a directory profiling

who they were. It was their way of making people aware that they are available and that they can do it – they just need people to recognise it.

What advice would you give to women wanting to enter a career in medicine?

Resources may be limited where you come from, but medicine and the knowledge required to succeed are global. It is important for women not to limit their vision or be misled into thinking that the world is very small. There is potential in all women if we focus, work hard and don't allow ourselves to be limited.

We must continue aiming for excellence. Facing bias is part of our path – whether that be concerning age, gender or race, but we need to remain focused. You never know who is watching and looking up to you; your influence is usually greater than you think. Shortly after I qualified as a specialist, I was interviewed on national television and asked to share my experience. A few weeks later, a mum of three approached me at the hospital to say that she saw me on TV and that I had inspired her to return to school and complete her education. When you succeed and give others hope of what is possible, it is a rewarding and humbling experience.

Although I have achieved a lot already, I always challenge myself to keep thinking bigger. It's not always obvious where opportunities will come from. I know that if I focus and work hard, there is no limit to what I can achieve. I hope to continue this journey and help to encourage and inspire other women to achieve the same.

To learn more about ECSACOP contact info@ecsacop.org. This article was produced in collaboration with ECSACOP. [Learn more about the RCP Global and ECSACOP partnership.](#)