

# Gorey-Malawi Health Partnership

*ESTHER Ireland Case Studies Series: Irish Institutions in North-South health partnerships*

## The Partnership at a Glance

<b>Irish Partner Institution</b>	Palms General Practitioner Surgery Gorey, Ireland
<b>Overseas Partner Institution</b>	St John's Hospital, Mzuzu, Malawi
<b>Focus</b>	To improve outcomes for the management of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) by working with health institutions and healthcare workers
<b>Beneficiaries</b>	Mzuzu Health Institutions, nonphysician healthcare workers (NPHWs), academic staff of Northern (University of Limerick, University College Dublin) and Southern (Mzuzu University) partners
<b>Total Support Received from ESTHER Ireland (Until 2021)</b>	€ 23,000 in grants
<b>Partnership Started</b>	2016

### Partnership Development

The Gorey-Malawi Health Partnership (GMHP) began in 2013 with an application for a Horizon 2020 Funding Call (a European funding program for research & innovation) relating to diabetes. This partnership is between the Palms GP Surgery in Gorey, Ireland and the Mzuzu Central Hospital,

Malawi in association with the Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) Unit; Ministry of Health; and Malawi and Luke International Norway (an international NGO based in Mzuzu). Several projects relating to diabetes and hypertension were undertaken by the partners. Asthma was later identified as an area in particular need, causing significant concern for the health centres involved.

The partnership was further strengthened by visits to Mzuzu by the Irish partners. The official inauguration of the GMHP happened in May 2016 in Mzuzu. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed linking The Palms GP surgery Gorey and St John's Hospital Mzuzu, Malawi in June 2018. This was made possible by an initial ESTHER supported scoping visit in 2016, subsequent successful task completions as well as the achievement of set goals. The partnership with St John's Hospital Mzuzu is built on the longstanding relationship between the two institutions and has received ESTHER approval and ESTHER partnership status.

The same week, a partnership with Mzuzu Central Hospital was created with the signing of a MoU; however, this partnership was terminated in 2020.

### Partnership Focus

Malawi is situated in the south-east of Africa and has a population of nineteen million. It is considered one of the poorest countries in the world and is among the world's least developed countries. Upon an assessment carried out in 2016, the prevalence of NCDs was identified as one of the most concerning health matters in Malawi.

NCDs are a primary concern for global health. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than 15 million people die prematurely from an NCD between the ages of 30 and 69 years old each year, and about 85% of these deaths occur in low-to-middle-income countries (LMICs).<sup>1</sup>

Malawi is suffering from a growing burden of non-communicable diseases and injuries (NCDIs), and these account for approximately one third of the country's deaths and disabilities. Around two thirds of Malawians living with an NCDI are under forty years of age. The ubiquity of NCDs in Malawi has further nurtured the prospect of a decline into poverty within the population. NCDs account for 28% of all deaths in Malawi.<sup>2</sup>

Healthcare in Malawi is facilitated by public, private for-profit, and private non-profit organizations and institutions. However, several demographic and socioeconomic characteristics and factors may influence NCD screening and management at an individual level. Regardless of NCDs being postulated as a health burden in Malawi, it remains a low funding priority. As a consequence, many patients have to bear the cost of their health visits and prescribed medications. The uneven distribution of the health services and the limited access to healthcare in rural areas has also impacted the effective management of NCDs at a community level.

The focus of this partnership is on the most common NCDs including asthma, diabetes, hypertension, and other heart diseases. It aims to work with institutions and their health workers, to strengthen health systems and thereby improve outcomes for the management of NCDs. Thus, the partnership intends to strengthen the health systems by improving institutional management through education, audit, research, and health system changes to promote NCD control and management in Malawi.

## Progress & Achievements

The interventions of the GMHP pivot in three key areas: clinical protocol generation; alignment of pharmacy stock policies; and planning of educational academic schemes using clinical audit to examine present practice. Assessments are made on what changes are feasible at the institution in question.

The following are several partnership interventions that have been carried out since the formation of the GMHP:

1. Education and discussions on the cases and management of NCDs between Ireland and Malawi. Sessions to exchange knowledge regarding NCDs between the two partners. These sessions include data review via Zoom and WhatsApp, reciprocal visits, and workshops.
2. Interventions in asthma-related chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) by St John's Hospital has demonstrated a 57% reduction in admission rates in the first year of implementation. Furthermore, the related work was presented formally at the Association of University Departments of General Practice in Ireland in February 2019, and was subsequently published in Forum Journal of the Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP), in July/August 2019.<sup>3</sup>
3. The initiation of a cardiovascular health protocol at St John's Hospital. Currently, St John's Hospital runs two NCD clinics per week working to improve hypertension and heart failure and diabetes.
4. The successful application to RHD Action (a global movement to reduce the burden of rheumatic heart disease in vulnerable populations of all ages throughout the world) for a \$2,500 grant to improve community awareness of rheumatic heart disease (RHD) at Chigwere, Malawi which commenced in 2019, and was built on the experience of St John's Hospital in developing education for people with HIV in the Chigwere area.
5. The expansion of interested parties to include more rural areas (e.g. Livingstonia, Malawi) that benefit from the partnership.

The partnership discussed the development of three further Moodle delivered educational modules (Module 1: Atrial fibrillation, Module 2: Heart Failure, and Module 3: Rheumatic Heart Disease) in relation to the COVID-19 response grant delivered to ESTHER Ireland. The funding is intended to be used to employ an animator who is skilled in e-learning design to produce content appropriate for a LIC via the Moodle platform, as well to produce additional explanatory animations where necessary.

The GMHP has been able to set an example, to showcase the contributions of global health partnerships in terms of the sharing of knowledge between established networks, develop new skills, and to work collectively for the betterment of the health systems through improvisation and adaptation, during a pandemic.

#### Partnership's Focus during the Pandemic

NCDs can also be termed as a kind of pandemic due to their high mortality and morbidity rates around the world. However, with the spread of COVID-19, the GMHP was able to utilize its resources to respond to the newer pandemic. As an immediate response, the partnership was able to allot physical resources, such as face shields, face masks, pulse oximeters, and thermometers. Furthermore, a Rapid Needs Assessment was performed in March 2020 using email and online meetings. A March 2020 visit by doctors and researchers to Malawi, to strengthen the work of the partnership in the area of NCD management, was also cancelled due to the spread of COVID-19. As a result, the partnership identified the education for healthcare workers and managers on COVID-19 to be one of the key gaps in the COVID-19 response.

Several planned events were postponed owing to the pandemic, including the following projects:

1. Workshops on Quality Improvement, and on the future direction of the partnership.
2. Potential collaboration involving the University of Limerick and St John's Institute of Health.
3. An academic development meeting with the University of Mzuzu- Department of Nursing, regarding the potential value of 'Moodle' delivered educational content.
4. A community-based meeting in Chigwere to establish the next step in our rheumatic disease awareness initiative.

As a solution to the emerging issues related to COVID-19, the GMHP along with the Global Health Programme of the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE), Irish Global Health Network (IGHN), the Global Health group of the Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP), and ESTHER Ireland developed an educational podcast series. This series comprised fourteen videos that addressed important topics related to COVID-19 including institution-readiness for COVID-19; maintaining essential services; protecting healthcare workers; COVID-19 clinical care; as well as the myths and facts regarding COVID-19. These videos were promoted via Facebook, YouTube, published on the ESTHER website and in a series of newsletters to make them available for distribution both online and via WhatsApp. The release of the first podcast took place in August 2020, in conjunction with the Public Health education programme of Malawi Ministry of Health. Following Facebook promotion, these were viewed over 2 million times in Africa. This resource and its rapid dissemination method was recognised by WHO and features on its Covid 19 Health Services Learning Hub.

## Lesson Learned

Overall, we think we managed the balancing act very well between supporting our partners as they dealt with COVID-19 while simultaneously progressing our own work together on NCDs.

COVID-19 prevented in-country or reciprocal visits for almost 2 years until a visit to Malawi in November 2021. This stalled progress. A workshop, exploring relationship possibilities between University of Limerick and St John's Institute of Health scheduled for March 2020 was shelved and has not taken place since. In-country visits allow both partners to work together, facilitate assessment of progress and provide the impetus for important decisions to be taken involving the progress of the partnership. At all points, relationships have been maintained via arranged WhatsApp phone call or FaceTime, Zoom which proved useful for data sharing and WhatsApp messaging which facilitated the viewing of health images and clinical information for rapid decision-making.

Resolution of difficulties is easier in a face-to-face environment. Progress together on NCDs certainly stalled as we all tried to cope with the impact of COVID-19 on our patient populations.

GMHP always attempts to disseminate information regarding our work on academic platforms, at the Esther partnership meetings and via the Irish Global Health Network. Up-to-date data on the COMPASS initiative in hypertension, demonstrating a 10 mm fall in systolic blood pressure for lower drug costs, was presented to the Association of University Departments of General Practice in February 2022.

The partnership model is excellent. It builds relationships between both sides and prevents either side from walking away when the going gets rough. Our biggest suggestion is to remember that partnerships do not always go smoothly and that it is important to stick together and work together through the roadblocks to reach the destination together. Sometimes it is also useful for both partners to ensure that they are both heading for the same destination.

### References:

1. World Health Organization (WHO). Non-communicable diseases [Internet]. (accessed 07 May 2022). Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases>
2. Cundale K, Wroe E, Matanje-Mwagomba BL, Muula AS, Gupta N, Berman J, et al.. Reframing noncommunicable diseases and injuries for the poorest Malawians: the Malawi National NCDI Poverty Commission. Malawi Medical Journal. Malawi Medical Journal; 2017;29(2):194.
3. Asthma care: Finding the right ingredients, July/ August 2019, Forum Journal of Irish College of General Practitioners <https://www.esther.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Malawi.pdf>

Read more about our partnership here:

<https://www.esther.ie/gorey-malawi-health-partnership/>

