

Cross-Party Group on Malawi

Wednesday 20 September 2023

Minutes

Present

MSPs

Sarah Boyack MSP
Liam McArthur MSP
Alexander Stewart, MSP

Invited guests

IN-PERSON:

Dr Chris Moxon, Clinical Senior Lecturer (Parasitology), University of Glasgow
Dr Dagmara McGuinness, Research Associate (Parasitology), University of Glasgow
Prof Lilach Sheiner, Professor (Parasitology), University of Glasgow
Watipenge Harmony Nyasulu, MSc student

Nadia Al-Haddad, University of Dundee
Emily Boulton-Jones, University of Dundee
Sally-Jane McAuley, University of Dundee
Lydia Galbraith, University of Dundee
Rachael Lyon, University of Dundee
Allie MacLeod, University of Dundee

DIGITAL:

Prof Mwapatsa Mipando, Associate Professor & former Principal, Kamuzu University of Health Sciences
Lizzie Bridget Tchongwe Divala, PhD student

Non-MSP Group Members

Barry Klaassen, Scottish Emergency Medicine – Malawi Project
Dr Peter West, Honorary Consul for Malawi in Scotland
Prof Heather Cubie, Malscot
Daniel Cosgrove, UNICEF
Stuart Brown, SMP
Chad Morse, SMP

Dorothea Nelson, SMP
Natasha Maluza, SMP

Digital

Alan Laverock, SMP
Alexandra Mackay
Ann Phoya
Blessings Banda
Calum Fisher
Christine Campbell
Fatou Drammeh UNICEF
Hannah Hausi
Kayira Lwitikano
Martha Varney
Michael MacKenzie
Oliver Koch
Pam Wilson
tmzengeza
Winnie Bunihizi
Youngson Ghambi

Apologies

Dr Alasdair Allan MSP
Mark Ruskell MSP
Lord McConnell
Patrick Grady MP
Allan Dorans, MP
Kirsty Blackman MP.

Welcome, apologies and minutes of last meeting

Liam McArthur MSP welcomed attendees, recognised MSPs in attendance and noted apologies where these had been given. The minutes of the previous CPG were proposed by Dr Peter West and seconded by Alexander Stewart MSP.

As the minutes of the last meeting reflect, it was agreed that the CPG's Secretary would ask the Scottish Government about the awarding of £8m pledged from the Scottish Government to tackle climate impacts in Malawi through the Climate Just Communities project. The answer came on July 27th and was:

"The Climate Just Communities programme was procured as a contract via fair and open procurement through the Scottish Government portal. The lead suppliers for these contracts have now been notified."

On 24th August, First Minister Humza Yousaf announced the recipients of this £8m fund over three years are SCIAF, DAI, and NIRAS.

AGM of the CPG, including (re-)election of Co-Convenors, Co-Vice Convenors and Secretary

- o Alasdair Allan MSP, Alexander Stewart MSP and Liam McArthur MSP were re-elected as Co-Convenors. (Proposed by Prof Heather Cubie, seconded by Sarah Boyack MSP).
- o Sarah Boyack MSP was re-elected as Vice Co-Convenor. Mark Ruskell MSP stepped down and was thanked for his time on the committee. (Proposed by Liam McArthur MSP, seconded by Dr Peter West).
- o Stuart Brown, Interim CEO of the Scotland Malawi Partnership, was re-elected as Secretary, proposed by Prof Heather Cubie and seconded by Dr Barry Klaassen. Liam thanked Stuart and his team on behalf of the CPG, for the support they provide.

The Malaria Vaccine in Malawi

In 2021, Malawi's President Chakwera launched the 'Zero Malaria Starts with Me' campaign, joining the pan-African movement to strengthen local, national, and regional efforts towards a malaria-free Africa. In that year, the World Health Organisation (WHO) stated that nearly half of the world's population is at risk of malaria, of which there are 247 million cases worldwide, causing an estimated 619 000 deaths. The WHO African Region was home to 95% of malaria cases, 96% of malaria deaths and children under 5 accounted for about 80% of all malaria deaths in the Region.

Dr Chris Moxon started the presentation outlining the successes of Malaria vaccines delivered to children also mentioning the drawbacks as the protection wanes and is not long-term.

Prof Mwapatsa Mipando of Kamuzu University of Health Sciences outlined the success of the Blantyre to Blantyre laboratory, a state-of-the-art laboratory established on the grounds of KUHeS accessible to many different departments and open to any other international collaborator. Equipment as used in the West was installed in Malawi with Solar energy used to feed the electricity. Due to the collaboration between Glasgow Uni and KUHeS Malawian laboratory technicians can get further training in Scotland before returning to Malawi applying the knowledge in the lab at KUHeS using the same equipment as in Scotland.

Prof Lilach Sheiner outlined the further symbiotic partnerships and research excellence that have come from the KUHeS and Glasgow University partnership.

Dr Dagmara McGuinness emphasised the change in the approach to training and research and its positive impact.

Waitipenge Harmony Nyasulu worked as a research assistant in Malawi and very much appreciated the opportunity to come to the UK to expand her knowledge and would put that knowledge to use back in Malawi applying the adequate skills & experience to continue to support research in Malaria immunity.

Lizzie Bridget Tchongwe Divala had been part of the first cohort of students who profited from the partnership between KUHeS and Glasgow University and thinks that the value of that experience was invaluable.

Prof Chris Moxon summed up by praising the real breakthrough with the vaccine acknowledging that the problem was not yet solved and that more work needed to be done through partnerships in Malawi and across the region. The revolving door model where people rotate/train and share skills and learn from each other was working well as demonstrated by the students present. More should be done to convince people in the UK to invest in Malawi as work on the ground in affected areas with local place knowledge provided vital links.

Q: In this scale of collaboration, what are the hard-won lessons to share?

A: Set-up happened during COVID which brought long delays. Equipment was bought before people were trained to use it and ask questions. It is not cheap to have such a lab but as strategic partner of Scottish Government this support is very welcome. Funding needs to be in place not only for scientist but also support staff (procurement). Long term investment helps. Constant learning, for example the solar energy produced is more than needed and part of it can be put back in the grid for use elsewhere on campus.

A: It is important to select leaders and make sure that everybody does their share.

Q: Is it counter-productive to invest in one centre of excellence or is there the aspiration to replicate this model to other universities/settings?

A: Hubs are critical and KUHeS is critical. The strategy for future depends on the area that is trying to advance. Currently the lab is set up for Health Sciences what are the options for alternative research? Police Scotland and Malawi Police are looking at establishing a lab to use for forensic science and are basing it on the model established at KUHeS.

A: To avoid diluting resources the way forward would be to pick up related elements in other places.

Q: Has a plan been made to assure continuity? Are there successors lined up to continue the work?

A: Longevity cannot be provided by one person, it is all about the partnership and not individuals and some new bright minds are coming through.

A: The laboratory is now a KUHeS laboratory and funded and sustained by the University.

Q: An important point was raised about the time it takes to establish this, it is good to hear that the SG invests in Blantyre to Blantyre lab but there needs to be a recognition that this needs to be long-term to come to fruition.

In the initial discussions in the creation of this laboratory facility there had been talk of adding HPV diagnostics to the lab. Do you feel that you have enough infrastructure and funding to make the lab open to all or do you depend on people using the lab coming with a grant ready?

A: The business plan includes opening the lab to everybody as a platform to do research. The lab is also used to provide at cost lab results service through a deal with one of the health insurances (this helps with sustaining service contracts). More contracts are needed as well as interest from researchers making applications.

A: Long-term support is necessary as many challenges have to be overcome.

There is obviously a significant body of evidence to create capacity and continuation funding is required.

Q: Malaria puts a strain on active hospitals so to bring it under control would free up spaces to deal with other health issues. What is the plan to roll this out further and wider?

A: This was a pilot project and based on its success of reducing Malaria in children initially by 80% (slightly less with follow-up vaccines) much larger availability of the vaccine should soon be available to reduce the hospitalisation impact (but no plans for wider roll-out announced yet).

AOB and Close

Thanks from Chair – Liam McArthur MSP

Liam McArthur MSP thanked speakers, attendees, MSP colleagues, MP of the APPG and the Scotland Malawi Partnership. After the meeting closed, in-person attendees had the opportunity for networking over Malawi gin and tonics or soft drink.