

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

Scientists should highlight their research in the mass media so that the communities appreciate scientific research

Khanyiwe Shawa is the science communication officer for the Malawi-Liverpool Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Program, she talks to Thengo Kavinya about her profession.



In the last two decades science has delivered dramatic results especially in health, medicine and lifestyle. Within the international scientific community there is an increasing awareness of the duty and responsibility of publicly funded scientists to make science more accessible to the general public. The media stimulates public debate and shapes public opinion but is the mass media in the country doing enough and if not why? I talked to Khanyiwe Shawa, Science communication officer at Malawi Liverpool Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Program (MLW) on her opinion on science communication in the country and the way forward.

“Basically, I think science communication is in its earliest stages in the country and there haven’t been much communication between scientists themselves and the media.” She further disclosed that most communities do not know anything about science, how it will benefit them, and that most communities have misconceptions of the work of scientists.

Asked the specific activities MLW is working on at the moment in terms of science communication, she reveals that since it is a new program, they are developing a science communication strategy, a logo and some IEC materials (brochures, t-shirts, posters, etc). “Mainly we are working on community/public sensitization of MLW and its activities. Currently its mainly through community meetings”.

On the positive note she disclosed that there is still hope “even though its been tough people have been willing to participate and I believe that as we go along communities will adjust. I would also like to urge scientist in the country to put great initiative in communicating with the media for example by publishing their research articles in the mass media other than just publishing in the science journals and also that they should try to they should try to write their articles in the layman’s language as much as possible”. She

also urges institutions that carry out scientific activities to recognize that science communication is important and to introduce science communication programmes like MLW has done. On a greater note she says it should be instilled in future scientists that it is their responsibility to engage the public in their work and that students should also be made aware that even though they are not scientists, it is their right and responsibility to know, understand and to participate in science activities and that science journalism should be encouraged.

Khanyiwe disclosed that even though science communication is getting root in the country there is steady progress as witnessed in the establishment of similar positions in organizations such as the Johns Hopkins University project and the Karonga Liverpool project. She said she plans to sensitize and network with various institutions e.g. schools and the private sector on the importance of science especially clinical research, so that they understand how it can benefit them. She further states that MLW intends to start a science communication related programme for schools. “The youth are my main interest because they usually still have an open mind, so it is important to use this opportunity to influence their knowledge, behaviour and attitudes, so that science communicators of the future have an easier time”.

Regarding policy makers, she says these will mainly be engaged when MLW has come up with research findings that maybe incorporated into policies. The science communication programme will be an intermediary between the two parties. She says this is because some policy makers are not scientists so therefore the science communication programme is ideal for this since it will fit in both scientific and non-scientific domains.

Khanyiwe is a first-born in the family of three. She did her secondary at Marymount Catholic Secondary school before proceeding to Chancellor College where she obtained a Bachelor of Science majoring in Biology in 2002. She worked for four years with Community Water Sanitation and Health, a project responsible for performance evaluation and communication before joining the Blantyre Synod Development Commission Project, a community based orphan care project. She joined MLW in June this year.

Asked why she was motivated to work as a science communication officer she points out that its just part of her life. “I have always been a communicator, during my college days I took part in drama and I also worked at CRECCOM theatre and with my interest in science I thought I could fit better as a science communicator. During her free time Khanyiwe likes reading both fiction and non-fiction books and she also likes watching television especially the history channel because she interested in knowing the history of the world.