

# Point of View: Modern medical myth: 'More doctors in Manchester than in Malawi': A preliminary communication

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## Abstract

This paper argues that there has never been a period in which there were more indigenous Malawi doctors working in Manchester than Malawi. An explanation for this myth is advanced.

## Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War and the onset of 'free market and multiparty globalisation' there has been an interest in the subject of human resources for health in developing countries like Malawi.<sup>1-4</sup> In the one party era the push/pull factors tended to favour overseas trained doctors staying away from home for political and economic reasons. However, the fact of doctors staying away from Malawi, or Nyasaland, as it was, was not new. The very first Malawi doctors, Dr Daniel Malekebu (who graduated in 1917) and Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda (who graduated in 1937), remained, largely for political and other reasons, some years abroad prior to returning home.

Since the democratic dispensation dawned in 1994, the debates have charted the fate of home trained doctors to see if they will stay home after training or emigrate for economic reasons.<sup>3,5-8</sup>

This short paper specifically addresses the 'medical myth' created by Malawi's brain drain in the 1970s to 1990s, when it was popularly considered that 'there were more Malawian doctors working in Manchester than in Malawi'.

## Method

This was a desk top study utilising public and authors' personal archival data.

Practical notes: the names of doctors are given up to 1972, thereafter, largely for reasons of brevity and ethics, only figures are given although the names of all doctors identified are available in the unpublished drafts. Most of the pioneer Malawi medical doctors who returned home before 1972 have, in any case, been mentioned by name in various historical texts.

The argument in this short paper refers to Malawi doctors working for government medical services in Malawi, and to all Malawian doctors working in the United Kingdom.

### *Tracing the pioneering doctors who returned home*

King and King<sup>9</sup> state that there were three Malawian doctors in Malawi in 1961. These figures would be from the same sources used by Baker in his seminal study of the Colonial Government Medical Services.<sup>10</sup> These three doctors would be Drs Augustine Bwanausi, S V Bhima and V Ngwira. By 1964, Drs D Chilemba and Y H Misomali had returned to make a total of 5 medical doctors working in Malawi

at independence. This number of 5 excludes Dr Daniel Malekebu, who never practiced medicine in Malawi and Dr Kamuzu Banda himself who had, by then, stopped practicing medicine, and had never, in any case, entered government medical service in Malawi.

Although a number of medical students had gone abroad through individual, missionary and government efforts, accelerated after self-government in 1961 when Kanyama Chiume was Minister of Education, the hope that by 1969, 32 Malawian doctors training in India, South Africa, Uganda' and elsewhere, would return, was 'not realised'.<sup>9</sup>

In 1972, there were 12 Malawian doctors working in Malawi.<sup>10</sup> If we assume this excludes Drs Banda and Malekebu, we can identify 9 of the 12 doctors, i.e. Drs D Chilemba, YH Misomali, J Belo, M Mvundula, N Chitimba, A Mwale, J Chiphangwi, M Chirambo and A Mkandawire.

The training of Malawi doctors abroad then gathered relative pace after an agreement between Chancellor College (University of Malawi) and Manchester University (UK) which enabled the latter to accept Chancellor College BSc graduates or bright post second year BSc students, beginning circa 1970, for medical training. Between one to three students annually benefitted from this agreement. And yet, by 1992, twenty-two years later, there were only 25 Malawian doctors (out of a total of 175 medical doctors) working in Malawi.<sup>9</sup>

### *Comparing the situation in the UK and Malawi over the decades.*

In 1976 there were only a few Malawian doctors working in the UK. We can only identify three of these.

For that same year, 1976, we identified 29 Malawian doctors as then working in Malawi.

For 1981 we identified 27 doctors as then working in Malawi. By then, 12 doctors, who had returned to Malawi after undergraduate training, had been granted overseas scholarships to enable them to specialise. Of these 12, five had come to the UK for their studies. For this period we were unable to identify more than 15 Malawian doctors working in the UK prior to the arrival of the 5 postgraduate students.

For 1985, the period considered as possibly when the number of Malawi doctors working in the UK was at its height, we identified 26 doctors as then working in Malawi and 22 doctors as working in the UK.

In the year following the official opening of the College of Medicine in 1991, according to official statistics, only 25 out of 175 doctors working in Malawi were Malawian.<sup>9</sup> The 1993 official statistics show that out of 120 doctors working in Malawi only 30 were Malawian.<sup>11</sup> In contrast in 2003, ten years after the establishment of the College of Medicine, out of all the 252 doctors working in Malawi, 123 were Malawian.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Our brief study shows that there has been no decade in which more Malawian doctors worked in the United Kingdom,

never mind Manchester, than in Malawi. It is doubtful that there was ever even a brief period when more Malawian doctors worked in the UK than in Malawi. This argument does, of course, not hold when considering 'all Malawi doctors working anywhere abroad'. The 'more Malawi doctors in Manchester than Malawi' has always been a myth. There are a number of possible sources for this myth.

a) The agreement by Manchester University Medical School to accept A level and Chancellor College BSc graduates or bright post second year BSc students made Manchester perhaps the most accommodating university in the world for Malawian would be doctors. There was thus a cluster of Malawi students and doctors working around the Greater Manchester/North West area. This raised the profile of Manchester University in Malawi.

b) Malawi Government efforts at persuading British government to repatriate Malawian doctors working in the UK tended to centre on those working around the Greater Manchester area.

c) A meeting in 1981 (which JL attended) at which the Malawi Ministry of Health attempted, and partly succeeded, to persuade doctors and (medical students on completion of their studies) to return to Malawi. The meeting was held in Manchester and was well attended by Malawi doctors and medical students from all parts of the UK. This probably gave some of the Malawi officials on the entourage the impression that many of these doctors were working in Manchester.<sup>13</sup>

As the Malawi College of Medicine prospers, it is perhaps time to bury one medical myth.

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