

Training surgeons in Malawi

Traffic accidents are a huge burden on the health care system in Malawi. The University of Bergen (UiB) is a partner in a project to train more surgeons in Malawi. **TEXT** SVERRE OLE DRØNEN

Sven Young hurries back to a consulting room at Kamuzu Central Hospital in Malawi's capital Lilongwe. A worried woman has brought an infant with back pain.

The Norwegian surgeon, from UiB's Department of Clinical Medicine, studies X-rays of the infant before consulting with his local assistants and calming the worried woman. He then uses his smart phone to photograph the X-ray.

"Tomorrow I am going to a medical congress and will have the opportunity to discuss the case with a colleague," Young explains. "Taking a photo with my mobile phone comes in handy."

This example shows how modern technology can be of help even in an impoverished country such as Malawi. However, the state of the Kamuzu Central Hospital's surgical ward, opened in 1977, thanks to aid from Denmark, leaves a lot to be desired. The decay is clearly visible

and Young and the other doctors face a daily battle in maintaining standards.

Training local specialists

Since 2008, Young and his wife have spent a total of almost four years on and off in Malawi, as part of a surgery-orthopaedics collaboration between Haukeland University Hospital (HUS) in Bergen and Kamuzu Central Hospital in Lilongwe. This project was run by Young, Professor Asgaut Viste, also of UiB's Department of Clinical Medicine, and specialist nurse Anne Mette Koch of HUS.

"The project aimed to improve quality and increase capacity in surgical treatment at the hospital in Lilongwe," explains Young. "We are training local general and orthopaedic surgeons in Malawi as well as more operating room nurses."

Shattering myths about surgery

Then an opportunity to apply for the NORHED programme arrived. Making the most of his UiB association, where he successfully defended his PhD thesis in January 2014, Young got funding for a new five-year project. His dissertation was about fracture treatment in low-income countries, using his work in Malawi as a base.

"I am surprised at how well-established myths about surgery in low-income countries are. Many people in the west still believe that

there is less need to treat injuries than to treat and prevent infectious disease in these countries," he says. "Another myth is that there are too many infections after surgery in low-income countries. This is not correct."

He believes that such myths prevent the introduction of modern surgical practices in countries like Malawi.

"In Malawi people with a fractured femur are still treated with traction and prolonged bed rest – a treatment the west left behind more than 50 years ago," says the surgeon.

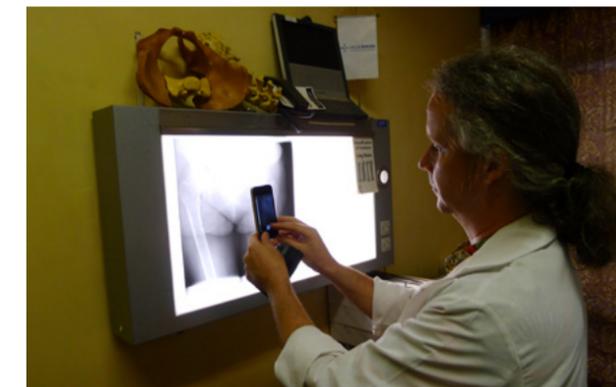
Young's research shows that infection rates are not much higher in Malawi than in rich countries, despite a greater number of serious injuries, a lack of resources and poor infrastructure.

"Risk of infection is no argument against introducing modern fracture treatment in low-income countries," argues Young.

Traffic accidents are the leading cause of death among young people in the world; more so than epidemic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria or tuberculosis. In addition, for every person who dies in traffic, there are three to ten people who become disabled for life.

A sustainable future

In most developing countries, there is no social security network to take care of those who fall outside of the labour force.



FACTS

NORHED

- The Norwegian Programme for Capacity Development in Higher Education and Research for Development.
- Norwegian state aid organisation NORAD sponsors this development programme.
- 46 projects receive funding for a five year period.
- UiB participates in 11 NORHED projects.
- Sven Young of the Department of Clinical Medicine is UiB's representative in the NORHED project *Capacity-building in post-graduate surgical training and research in Malawi*. Haukeland University Hospital is also a project partner.
- Host institution for the project is the College of Medicine at the University of Malawi. Other local participants are Kamuzu Central Hospital in Lilongwe and Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital in Blantyre.
- The doctors in the programme are to get part of their training at the Christian Medical College in Vellore, India.
- For more information on NORHED, visit: norad.no/norhed
- For more information on global health research at UiB, visit: uib.no/en/cih

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"We want our work in Malawi to be sustainable in the long run. This is why we are also involved in preventive measures, such as public information campaigns and distributing pedestrian reflectors to people who walk along the roads in the dark. But our main focus is to train more Malawian specialist doctors and nurses," says Young.

However, educating and training more health care professionals in Malawi is by no means the only challenge the country is facing.

"It is hard to get doctors to remain in the country to work at public hospitals, or in Malawi at all, during or after education. So we have included an incentive scheme in the programme, with scholarships during training."

Improving hospital standards

Sven Young also hopes that the NORHED project can help pave the way

towards future financing for Kamuzu Central Hospital.

"Our dream is to build an orthopaedic wing with all the amenities expected in a modern hospital," he says. "Today, the richest Malawians travel to South Africa even for minor surgery. If we could offer better facilities and well-trained surgeons here, we could generate income directly in and for the hospital, thus becoming less reliant on aid – and the local doctors and nurses could be offered more decent wages."

He adds that being able to offer private health services to the local elite is important for Malawi's professional prestige.

"It is almost impossible for Malawian physicians to live on public hospital salaries alone," says Sven Young. "They need alternative sources of income within the public health care system if the work to build sustainable public health solutions in Malawi is to succeed." ●



SCENES FROM A HOSPITAL: Patient David Balisoni (left) broke his leg in an attack and is now in his fifth week in traction, a typical 'old-fashioned' treatment which is still far too common in Africa. Sven Young (top right) uses his phone to photograph an X-ray. Doctor Gift Mulima (bottom right) is training to become a specialist general surgeon as part of the NORHED project in Malawi. ALL PHOTOS: SVERRE OLE DRØNEN



Surgeon Sven Young from UiB's Department of Clinical Medicine in his office at Kamuzu Central Hospital.