

Two for One: The Tandem PA Comparable in Malawi

Author Profile:

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Working as a Mental Health & Psychiatrist Clinical Officer, Solomon David Chomba BSc, leads the mid-level practitioners in Malawi by sitting as the co-founding president of the Physician Assistants Union of Malawi, the umbrella body for Clinical Associates (CA), Clinical Officers (CO), Medical Assistants (MA) and Dental Therapists (DT) alike.

General Information:

Malawi has multiple levels of mid-level medically trained clinicians. In 1890 the medical assistant position was created, Because of the physician shortage, the Clinical Officer (CO) profession was established in 1979 as a short-term measure. The CO proved to be so critical in health systems which made the Ministry of Health (MoH) to continue developing the CO profession. The MoH recognized that this well-trained cadre worked well in compliment with the MA and became the backbone of health care in Malawi.

While there are two terms for the profession, Clinical Associate (CA) is the formal title given to mid-level providers within the country.

Entry Criteria:

The entry certificate is a Malawi School Certificate of Education which is a highest secondary education certificate. This applies to Medical Assistant and Generic Clinical officer.

There are no pre-requisite degrees required for entry into a CO, MA, or BSc program. However, an MA can upgrade to a diploma using their Clinical Medicine Certificate and completing a two-year bridging program. If specialties like orthopedics, ophthalmology, or anesthesia are desired, the conversion program is 18 months.

Written and oral entrance exams are required for entry into every program.

Education:

There are 3 CO programs in Malawi at present. After graduating from college, interested students enroll in a twelve-month internship program where they work under the supervision of qualified staff. All students rotate every three months through the four departments of medicine, surgery, pediatrics, and OB/GYN.

Many students can begin with a diploma in a health field. These programs focus on general medicine and will build the foundation for students looking to expand further into clinical practice. The diploma curriculum takes three didactic years and an additional one year of clerkship. After this phase is complete, students can choose to advance to a Bachelor of Science (BSc) which is a two- to three-year upgrade from a diploma.

The MoH also recognized that COs needed a 'career ladder' thus they introduced and accredited BSc programs at various training institutions (colleges and universities). The BSc course is a two-to-three-year upgrade from the diploma. These help students extend beyond general diagnosis and practice. BSc programs are specialty programs while diploma level is a general practice into any of the 4 disciplines of medicine."

BSc courses are specialty focused programs that exist for Mental Health, Maternal Health, Psychiatry, Medicine, Public Health, Nutrition, Surgery, Orthopedics, Anesthesia, Pediatrics and Child Health, and OB/GYN. Those that wish to move further will learn the surgical skills necessary to constitute themselves as COs providing more focus to these students looking to have more advanced technical skills. For example, the orthopedic, ophthalmology and anesthesia bridges are 18 months in duration.

Roughly there are 300 graduates a year from MA and CO programs. CA training at Malawi College of Medicine has about 100 graduates. St John of God College of Health Sciences trains Mental Health and Psychiatry CAs and they graduate about 30 CAs each year.

Financing Education:

The Malawi College of Health Science is public and is financed by Malawi government. Alternative education centers are deemed "private CHAM facilities and receive only partial government funding. Some students pay for themselves while others get scholarships as the Ministry of Finance (MOF) can often come up short on the educational funding.

Accrediting/Regulatory Bodies:

Accredited by National Council for Higher Education of Malawi (NCHEM)

<http://www.nche.ac.mw/>

Private Bag B371

Lilongwe, Malawi

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Regulated by

Medical council of Malawi

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The Ministry of Education (MOE) sets the guidelines for the required education standards of each profession, while the MOH focuses on the quality standards of the health training courses so that they are in line with the healthcare needs of the nation. No school can operate without accreditation.

The three ministries collaborate well together in line with their ministry mandate as per Malawi laws. For instance, Ministry of Education provides guidelines for the required education standards of the College while the Ministry of Health looks at the quality and standards of the health training courses in line with the healthcare need of the nation. Ministry of Labour looks at employer and employee working conditions as well as advocacy for recruitment of healthcare workers. Ministry of labor also looks at issues of safety of the working environment and assist health care workers on issues of compensation. Funding comes through Ministry of Finance to the Ministry of Education, but is, however; not sufficient for to support all our clinical students.

Affiliate Group:

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Professional Licensure:

No official certification examination is required upon completion of the ladder program. The Medical Association of Malawi provides the licensure to those who practice within the country.

Continuing Medical Education/Continuing Professional Development (CPD) meetings are held for CA graduates and points are given to each member before license renewal; however, no CPD credits are required to maintain licensure at this time. At the time of this article, CPDs were temporarily stopped due to unforeseen reasons but there are plans to restart them dependent on the new resolution. The team at the Medical Association of Malawi is working on this.

Scope of Practice:

MAs manage all health centers while COs manage all district hospitals and central hospitals and take leadership positions in clinical departments at the MOH. The latter has extensive training in both minor and major surgeries with the chance to run specialty clinics in accordance with their gained expertise. MAs have a limited scope of practice compared to COs. Due to the specialty training, COs have a wider range of abilities within their scope of practice that extends beyond primary care provision. COs in Malawi are trained to handle all emergencies both surgical and medical conditions. They work independently.

However, regardless of the title, there are currently no limitations on the medications that can be prescribed by these specialists.

This profession is fully recognized and it's what has sustained health care system in Malawi before the start of medical officer trainings.

Job Opportunities:

Currently 3500 COs are registered and licensed with the medical council of Malawi which keeps a database of licensed providers; however, there are an additional 500 recent graduates not yet registered and over 4000 providers previously unregistered.

References:

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