

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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Strengthening the rheumatology workforce in Africa: mobilizing medical students for lasting impact

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To the Editor

The persistent shortage of rheumatology specialists across Africa has raised significant concerns, with merely 2970 specialists catering to a staggering 1.19 billion individuals distributed across 44 countries [1]. This alarming gap, equivalent to a mere 0.25 specialists per 100,000 population, underscores the pressing need for innovative solutions to address this critical deficiency [1]. Among the potential avenues for mitigating this gap, harnessing the untapped potential of medical students emerges as a promising strategy with far-reaching implications.

The multifaceted challenges contributing to the scarcity of African rheumatology specialists encompass limited training opportunities, resource constraints, and geographical disparities [2]. Similarly, the economic context of healthcare in many African countries is characterized by competing priorities, with a predominant focus on infectious diseases [3]. This uneven emphasis has implications for other medical specialties, particularly rheumatology, as it disproportionately receives fewer resources and funding. The limited financial investment in rheumatology adversely affects research initiatives, educational programs, and clinical infrastructure. Moreover, newly graduated medical students know the economic realities of their chosen career paths. The lack of funding in rheumatology creates concerns about the

sustainability of a career in this specialty. Students often perceive other fields as offering better financial stability and career prospects [4]. These factors collectively perpetuate the suboptimal quality of care and prolonged patient diagnoses, impacting health outcomes across the continent. To counter this, a proactive strategy involves empowering medical students to consider rheumatology a specialized field from the outset.

Empowering medical students requires a multifaceted approach that extends beyond traditional academic methods. Incorporating rheumatology education into curricula, hosting targeted workshops, and introducing early exposure to the field can spark and nurture students' interest. However, true empowerment surpasses theoretical learning—it necessitates nurturing genuine dedication. Through strategic mentorship, experiential learning, and research opportunities, students can develop a profound understanding that transcends classroom education, equipping them to navigate the complexities of rheumatic conditions effectively.

Furthermore, online platforms have emerged as powerful tools to address knowledge gaps and provide accessible learning opportunities. The African Society of Musculoskeletal Ultrasound (AUS) and the African League Against Rheumatism (AFLAR) have undertaken commendable initiatives by offering online training and educational lectures [4]. However, challenges persist, as evidenced by a notable disparity in participation between African, Asian, and South American doctors. The limited participation of African medical professionals in online educational initiatives may stem from a lack of awareness about the availability and relevance of these programs. Efforts should be made to promote and advertise online

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courses, emphasizing their contribution to professional development and the advancement of medical specialties like rheumatology. In addition, recognizing the disparities in access to rheumatology education, an alternative and impactful solution is fostering intra-Africa training collaborations. Countries with well-established rheumatology services can serve as regional centers providing training programs for medical professionals across Africa. Establishing partnerships between countries with rheumatology services and those seeking to strengthen their expertise creates a support network. This collaboration can involve exchange programs, joint research initiatives, and shared educational resources, fostering a sense of unity and shared knowledge.

As medical students transition into specialists, their active engagement in rheumatology can precipitate a transformative impact on Africa's healthcare landscape. By offering continuous opportunities for professional growth, facilitating lifelong learning, and providing support throughout their journey toward specialization, these future specialists can emerge as vigorous advocates for rheumatology. Importantly, this transition thrives in a collaborative ecosystem, necessitating concerted efforts from academia, healthcare institutions, and governmental bodies to formulate a comprehensive strategy.

Mobilizing medical students as a potent force in countering the rheumatology specialist shortage carries profound implications. Equipped with knowledge, skills, and a strong sense of purpose, these emerging specialists have the power to reshape the rheumatology landscape, elevate the quality of patient care, and contribute significantly to reducing healthcare disparities across Africa.

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