Gonorrhoea has resisted over 10 drugs since the 1930s.

As gonorrhoea is treatable, the tendency of its causative bacteria to resist medication could be cause for worry as in future it would be hard to treat it, Dr. Mitch Matoga told the press recently.

He was addressing members of the media in a recent media partnership initiative meeting held at UNC Project.

"We treat between 60 and 80 patients per day for sexually transmitted infections at Bwaila. For sure there are many people out there whom we would have treated but they don’t come to the clinic; they get drugs over the counter to treat themselves," he said.

According to Matoga, gonorrhoea has resisted over 10 drugs since the 1930s and chances are that the infection could resist current drugs as well.

It is in the same vein that a study is underway at Bwaila Hospital STI clinic to assess if gentamicin is still an effective drug in the treatment of gonorrhoea infection in Malawi. Gentamicin is the current standard of care drug for the treatment of gonorrhoea in Malawi.

However, just like many other microorganisms, gonorrhoea undergoes changes that make it become resistant to antibiotics and eventually become non-effective.

The study is a follow up to a previous survey conducted in 2007, which showed that gentamicin was still effective.

Men over 18 years with a urethra discharge regardless of their HIV status were enrolled into the study, checking for Neisseria gonorrhoea and conducting antibiotic sensitivity tests in the microbiology lab. They were also invited for a follow up visit one week later to check if their gonorrhoea was cured based on clinical and laboratory assessments. 154 men were enrolled.

According to Matoga, since the introduction of gentamycin in 1993 and together with drugs like doxycycline and metronidazole, cure rates have remained good despite declining global sensitivity.

The Malawi Demographic Health Survey done in 2015 to 2016 shows that prevalence rate of STI syndromes in males and females was about 1 million and about 15 percent women and 10 percent men aged 15-49 years were registered for STIs.

And a 2018 Demographic health survey shows that about 116,523 cases of sexually transmitted infections were treated between July and September 2018.

Since the discovery of penicillin in 1928, antibiotics have revolutionised the way sexually transmitted infections like gonorrhoea are treated.

Among other factors, resistance of bacteria to antibiotics in the country is blamed on careless prescription of drugs to the public and abuse of antibiotics bought over the counter often without prescription at all.
They came with enthusiasm and zeal to serve in the Community Advisory Board (CAB). Their voluntarism spirit is what will see UNC Project being advised on the way it should handle itself especially in the community in relation to study participants and other stakeholders.

Of particular interest on this bright, sunny Friday of September 13, 2019 were 6 youths who also pledged to serve in the CAB, giving advice particularly in studies involving their fellow youth.

Inducting all the general members into this new CAB, Phaleda Kumwenda, nurse in the community department said the youth CAB members were in the age range of 17 to 25 and they would also be having their own scheduled meetings where they could discuss their roles as youths.

"Despite their role as youth CAB, we shall also be meeting them in the general CAB meetings which consists of all ages,“ she said.

She added that the youths would also be in the CAB for a maximum of three years but if they shall not be more than 24 years at the expiry of their term, they could be graduated into the general CAB for another term.

Speaking in a recent general staff meeting, UNC Project Country Director Innocent Mofolo also said it was mandatory for some studies like the IMPACT 2016 to have a youth CAB.

He said: “In line with that, we have been advised that our CAB should also include adolescents. (This age range falls within WHO’s definition of young people, which refers to individuals between ages of 10 and 24). We have to respond to needs of our time or requirements of our time.”
Voila! KCH has a pediatric lab

Kamuzu Central Hospital Pediatric Laboratory was officially opened in the Ward A of the children’s section on November 14th, 2019. This collaborative project was led by Dr. Elizabeth Fitzgerald, supported by UNC Project Malawi, and funded by the Malawi Children's Initiative. Rob Krysiak, co-director of the UNC Project Malawi laboratories, provided valuable technical and logistical support.

This lab, which will provide analyses including FBC and urine and electrolytes, hepatitis studies, microscopy, and CSF analysis, will significantly improve the standard of care for pediatric patients at KCH and contribute to improving the education of Malawian medical learners by improving diagnostic capability.

Kamuzu Central Hospital is the main referral center for the central region of the country and admits as many as 25,000 children per year. Dr. Fitzgerald’s work in Malawi is supported in part by the UNC Department of Pediatrics, where she serves as the Director of Pediatric Global Health, by SEED Global Health, and by PACHIMAKE, which is a consortium of institutions committed to improving care at KCH.

Two doctors have received AIDS Malignancy Consortium (AMC) Fellowship awards to conduct more research in their areas of interest. AMC is a National Cancer Institute-supported clinical trials group founded to support innovative trials for AIDS-related cancers. Both will commence their studies early 2020.

Clinical pathologist Dr. Tamwe Tomoka will be studying one of the common cancers affecting the lymphatic system in HIV positive people in Malawi – the Diffuse Large B cell lymphoma (DLBCL).

“I will study Diffuse Large B cell lymphoma (DLBCL), a common cancer affecting the lymphatic system in HIV positive people in Malawi. Specifically, I will investigate cell of origin (COO) subtypes, BCL2/MYC co-expression in DLBCL in Malawian adult patients and examine prognostic associations with overall survival and differences by HIV status,” said one Tomoka.

On the other hand, another cancer specialist Dr. Bongani Kaimila will be studying how TINY (Tiny Isothermal Nucleic acid amplification sYstem), a small portable machine can diagnose Multi Centric Castleman Disease (MCD), a rare disease that affects the lymph nodes and related tissues, in the same way as regular pathology would do.

The AIDS AMC is a National Cancer Institute-supported clinical trials group founded to support innovative trials for AIDS-related cancers. The AMC mission is to investigate new treatment and prevention interventions for malignancies in people living with HIV and to study the pathobiology of these tumors in the context of clinical trials. The AMC fellowship, a highly competitive program was established to encourage and foster the development of clinical investigators in Sub-Saharan Africa to pursue careers in clinical research trials in HIV-associated malignancies within the context of the AMC.
**Maize is the staff of life**

Artist Michael Kapalamula, renowned for painting various murals within UNC Project buildings was recently caught in the thick of things doing artworks for data storage containers at the UNC Project guest house.

He explained that the green maize he was painting on the containers symbolized a healthy life as that is where life hinges on.

"The painting is highlighting maize in the field. Maize is staple food for our country and in the painting it basically stands for nutrition. Without good nutrition, we become sick. Thus before we start taking medicine, let’s ensure that we are nutritionally sound," he said.

A staff is support used to prevent someone from succumbing to weakness.

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**Community dates traditional leaders to introduce new studies**

Why don’t men suffer from cervical cancer yet you say they can spread it to women?

The answer to the question may appear simple to many working in the medical research sector and even to the general public. Males don’t have the cervix. However, this and other questions were part of what the community team and other UNC Project staff faced recently when they met traditional leaders from the UNC Project catchment area to sensitize them on new studies in the areas of cancer and HIV.

The meetings were held on 27 and 29 November at Kawale Health Centre and Bwaila Hospital respectively.

The studies being introduced were: PEER Cervical Cancer Study presented by Wezzie Dunda, AMC099 (Cervical cancer) and ‘Tonse Pamodzi’.

Members of the community team, community advisory board, and government officials all participated in handling the questions, helping in clearing mists concerning such research.

One of the traditional leaders who actively put across questions said when they are in the communities they often face a lot of organisations all coming to give various messages and interventions to the communities.

“Sometimes we are overwhelmed with activities coming from various corners and there is need for us to properly comprehend the messages so that we can also inform our subjects and address related issues when they crop up in our communities,” he said.

Community educator Alfred Chitema said it was always necessary that traditional leaders from the Project’s catchment area be informed of the studies which were being undertaken as this would also help in curbing rumours and misconceptions.
Here are some highlights of activities which have been happening within UNC Project recently.

UNC Project staff come together before the march to commemorate the World Antibiotic Resistance Awareness Week commenced on 20 November 2019. Photos: Calisto Sekeleza

KCH Hospital Director Dr. Jonathan Ngoma and UNC Project Country Director Innocent Mofolo during the antibiotic resistance awareness march.

UNC Project staff soon after the ‘Think Pink’ cancer march on Saturday 27 October 2019.

KCH Hospital Director Dr. Jonathan Ngoma and UNC Project Country Director Innocent Mofolo during the antibiotic resistance awareness march.

UNC Pharmacy students Tyler and Amy presenting on anti-microbial resistance during the general staff meeting at Tidziwe on September 18 2019.

Drs. Hillary Topazian and Tisu Mvalo presenting a poster on MVIP evaluation at the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene (ASTMH) annual conference in Washington DC on November 21 2019. Photo courtesy of Dr. Tisu Mvalo.
Mistakes happen. Everyone can make mistakes. However, don’t complicate the situation in unthoughtful efforts to conceal the mistake. That’s another mistake.

This was a hot discussion during a presentation by Data Officer Mathews Mukatipa on Good Clinical Practice (GCP) during a study specific training which took place on Thursday December 12 2019 for staff involved with the LCC1905 cervical cancer project.

And Clinical Site Research Leader Staff from Bwaila who will be conducting the Tonse Pamodzi study were on Friday 6 December 2019 taken through the study and how it will be conducted.

According to Dr. Friday Saidi who will be leading the team in Malawi the two-day training was aimed at finalizing the counseling intervention manual as well and orientating staff on the study overview.

Dr. Lameck Chinula advised members present that whenever they wanted to effect a correction, they had to think twice. “It’s very easy to find a trail of mistakes. Before you want to correct discuss with the study coordinator. It may be a deviation. The problem is when you want it to look like a right thing while it was wrong,” he said.

In a move to ensure good clinical practice, Chinula encouraged all staff involved in studies to ‘work as a team.’

Facilitators and participants familiarization training. Photos: Callisto Sekeleza

Study staff oriented on ‘Tonse Pamodzi’

Staff from Bwaila who will be conducting the Tonse Pamodzi study were on Friday 6 December 2019 taken through the study and how it will be conducted.

According to Dr. Friday Saidi who will be leading the team in Malawi the two-day training was aimed at finalizing the counseling intervention manual as well and orientating staff on the study overview.

Protocol chairs Dr. Ben Chi from the US and Dr. Wilbroad Mutale from Zambia led the orientation. In attendance were also Kellie Freeborn and Mildred Lusaka who are the team leaders for Zambia.

‘Tonse Pamodzi’ literally meaning ‘together as one’ is a pilot study to be conducted at Bwaila Hospital, Malawi and Chipata Level 1 Hospital in Zambia starting from mid January in 2020.

The full title of the pilot study is ‘An integrated strategy to support antiretroviral therapy (ART) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) adherence for HIV prevention and breastfeeding women’.

The inclusion criteria for participants in the study are: HIV positive pregnant women initiating ART, and HIV negative pregnant women at high risk of HIV acquisition initiating on PrEP. All these have to be of age 18 years and above.

"Acknowledge mistakes’ in source documentation

Mathews Mukatipa presenting on Good Clinical Practices. Photos: Callisto Sekeleza

Dr Lameck Chinula displaying use of a thermocoagulator in the treatment of cervical cancer.
Country Director Innocent Mofolo has described 2019 as remarkable year in terms of operations of the UNC Project especially in research. He was speaking on Saturday December 14 2019 during the UNC Project end of year party before staff, UNC students, members of the community advisory board (CAB), members of media partnership initiative and other invited guests. He said it was important to celebrate contributions of staff and partners as the strength of the Project lay in community sense of purpose.

“2019 was remarkable. It was a year that we have been conducting complicated studies requiring more expertise for instance the HIV and other prevention studies like the HPTN 084 and AMP (Antibody Mediated Prevention) which are complicated to conduct,” he said, adding that the studies have got potential to change or contribute to the health system in Malawi and the entire world.

Mofolo also said 2019 saw a change in the reach of operations of the UNC Project.

Said he: “We now have presence in Mulanje, Phalombe, Machinga, Kasungu and Mchinji. I am very grateful of this movement. I thank you for all for your dedication.”

He also announced great news for UNC Project for the funding from the Fleming Fund for a study in Antimicrobial Resistance.

“This shows that the funders have trust in us,” he said.

UNC Project International Director Irving Hoffman thanked all for their contribution in the operations of UNC Project and wished them a happy festive season.

During the gathering management also recognized retiring and long serving members and CAB members of the UNC Project.
Lennie, beating the riding odds

Please tell us who you are.
I am Lennie Mphande, 27. I am one of the evaluation assistants for the Malaria Vaccine Implementation Programme. I started work around April 2019.

What does your work involve?
We evaluate the malaria vaccine. For instance, if an under five kid dies, we go to that deceased’s family and we speak to them — verbal autopsy — we find out more about the history of the child for instance what the child was suffering from, what kind of vaccines they received, hoping that in the years coming such deaths would be reduced.

How far do you ride from UNC Project?
I have ever worked for the Malawi Electoral Commission where I was doing field data collection and I have experience working with communities especially in the rural areas.

Any challenges concerning riding?
It’s challenging when riding in the sandy roads.

Have you ever fallen down riding?
(Laughter) In my work I have never fallen down. I try as much as possible to avoid falling down.

What do you like about your job?
I like meeting new people, new environments. Chatting with chiefs, working hand in hand with volunteers from the village.

Photos: Callisto Sekaseka

UNC Project People will be a regular feature in each issue of the Tidziwe POST.
Do you know someone with anything interesting or unique at UNC Project?
Please email your suggestions to csekeleza@uncilongwe.org indicating name and department the individual is working in.

Photos: Lawrence Chaduka