New African Medical Schools meet in Namibia: Consortium of New Sub Sahara African Medical Schools (CONSAMS)

Quentin Eichbaum describes a meeting held in Namibia which was attended by several new medical scools in Africa under the umbrella of Consortium of New Sub Sahara African Medical Schools (CONSAMS)

Between February 25th and 28th 2024, the representatives of 44 new African medical schools (including mostly Deans and provosts) gathered in Windhoek the capital of Namibia for a three day in-person conference to discuss the status of medical education at new African medical schools and to plan a collaborative path forward. This was the first time since the Covid19 pandemic that CONSAMS - the Consortium of New Sub-Sahara African Medical Schools has been able to hold an in person meeting.

Prior to that, the CONSAMS schools had been meeting in person at least once or twice a year since its founding in 2011 on-site at one of the new medical school campuses. Initially, CONSAMS was comprised of only five medical schools: University of Namibia, Botswana, Copperbelt in Zambia, Unilurio in Mozambique, and a developing school in Lesotho.[1,2,3,4] In 2017, the decision was taken to expand the Consortium across the continent as a pan-African organization with the potential to include all 135 new schools.

The meeting was fully sponsored by a private donor with a strong interest in rural medicine and One Health programs. The meeting opened with keynote addresses on medical humanities and on One Health programs given by faculty from the University of Global Health Equity (UGHE) in Rwanda (Dr Denis Regnier and Dr Phaedra Henley, respectively). CONSAMS considers medical humanities a key component for early implementation in the curriculums of new medical schools in order to effectively promote the declining "art of medicine".[5] Likewise, given that many new medical schools are located in rural areas, One Health programs are considered critical for promoting interdisciplinary understanding and research between medicine, agriculture, microbes, and wildlife.



Participants at CONSAMS 2024

The third topic, consistent with the theme of One Health, was toxicology. The president of the American Society for Toxicology, Dr. Paul Wax, was invited to deliver a keynote talk. Given that pesticides are widely

Quentin Eichbaum was born and raised in Namibia, graduated MD, PhD, MPH from Harvard Medical School and is currently full Professor of Pathology, Microbiology and Immunology and Medical Co-Director of Transfusion Medicine at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, and Professor Medical Education at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine



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used in rural areas in Africa, it is important to understand how to regulate their effective usage and how to treat pesticide poisoning. Toxicology also includes treatment of snakebites which are highly prevalent and often deadly in rural areas as in Namibia and other parts of Africa. The new schools are planning to include the topics on rural medicine and toxicology in their curriculums.

Each of the new medical schools had the opportunity to give short talks on developments at their respective schools: their curricula, admissions policies, faculty development, postgraduate training programs, and accreditation processes. Among the schools representated at the meeting were schools from Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, Somaliland, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda.

The major function of the conference was also to allow ample time for delegates to network through receptions and dinner functions. Members needed to get to know one another in person to facilitate sharing of knowledge, programs, and to promote exchanges of faculty and students. Networking has been a major strength of CONSAMS from its early days when it was comprised of only 5 medical schools in southern Africa.

The sponsors and delegates of the northern partners also visited the rural clinics and hospitals in the north of Namibia in Oshakati and Ondangwa. A similar visit had taken place ten years ago in 2012 and 2015 and it was very encouraging to see the enormous progress that had been made over the intervening decade. At that time a film was made about the University of Namibia (UNAM) students' rotation to the rural clinics and hospitals - called A Doctor of My Own (highly recommended viewing) Other discussions took place during a full afternoon of round table sessions on topics such as assessment practices, professional development, joint appointments, curriculum integration, accreditation, and identity.

An afternoon visit to the campus of the University of Namibia School of Medicine (UNAMSoM) came as a surprise to many delegates given how spectacular the facilities at this medical school are. The American visitors said they were "blown away" by the facilities. It was clear that UNAMSoM is already producing outstanding doctors some of whom were encountered during the visit to the rural clinics during the visit to the north.

Feedback from the conference was universally excellent and delegates returned home energized and prepared to go forward during the year with virtual meetings that included the newly formed Research and Education subcommittees. At the AGM new office bearers was elected with Dean Felicia Christians from UNAM as President, and Dr Dorothy Kamya from Aga Khan Medical School in Nairobi as vice president. The next annual meeting will be held in 2025 at Aga Khan University Medical School in Nairobi. In the meantime, CONSAMS members will continue to meet regularly virtually as a Consortium, through faculty and student exchanges, and through the Education and Research subcommittees. These committees have planned studies pertaining to research endeavors and the education programs at the new schools. Any new medical schools (or individuals at such schools) interested in participating in CONSAMS should view the website: www.CONSAMS.net.

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