The World Medical Association: structure, influence, African and women leadership and Dr. Kitulu's journey to WMA leadership

A narrative on WMA and women leadership highlighting the journey of Dr. Kitulu's rise to presidency.



Figure 1: World Medical Association Executive Committee 2025 during the WMA council meeting in Montevideo, Uruguay

Introduction

Medical societies have been present since the 17th Century. Dr. John Coakley Lettson founded the Medical Society of London providing an opportunity for practitioners to meet and compare their observations and their thoughts mutually, taking notes of new discoveries(1) Professional associations provide an opportunity for members to remain connected in a meaningful way by facilitating structured opportunities for networking and continued medical education opportunities[(2)]. They have shaped medical ethics, supported advocacy for improved healthcare and stimulated the advancement of research.

The World Medical Association

The World Medical Association (WMA), widely known for its central and foundational role in developing the International Code of Medical Ethics through the Declaration of Helsinki, is a global organization that brings together physicians from across the world to advance medical practice. As part of the Declaration of Helsinki, WMA developed and adopted the physician pledge, which serves as the modern version of Hippocratic Oath. The physician pledge provides moral and ethical guidance to all physicians globally. The association WMA statements and declarations influence national laws, bioethics policies, and professional codes of conduct in many countries.

The WMA was founded in 1947 in response to the need for an independent, global organization that could represent physicians and promote ethical standards in medicine, particularly after the medical atrocities committed during World War II. It currently represents over 9 million physicians worldwide through 115 medical associations. Additionally, WMA accepts associate membership from individual physicians. The mission of WMA is "To serve humanity by endeavoring to achieve the highest international standards in medical education, medical science, medical art and medical ethics, and health care for all people in the world." (WMA, 2025).

Structure

The World Medical Association (WMA) leadership structure comprises a Council elected by constituent members, a chairperson (political head), and a President (ceremonial head) elected by the General Assembly, with representatives from seven regions. The council and chairperson of the council are elected every two years, whereas the president is elected annually. Additionally, the association has a Secretary General and a treasurer. The Secretary-General, appointed by the Council, is the Chief Executive responsible for the day-to-day operations of the WMA Secretariat, which is based in Ferney-Voltaire, France.

The main decision-making body of WMA is the General Assembly, which meets annually with delegation from constituent members (National medical Associations) and representatives of associate members.

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Figure 2: WMA JDN leadership with WMA executive committee team during a past meeting

The WMA Council is supported by three primary standing committees that provide reports during every council meeting.

1. **Medical Ethics Committee**: Responsible for developing and revising ethical guidelines and policies that govern medical practice globally.
2. **Finance and Planning Committee:** Oversees the financial health and strategic planning of the WMA, ensuring resources are allocated effectively to support its mission.
3. **Socio-Medical Affairs Committee**: Addresses social determinants of health, public health issues, and the broader societal context in which medicine operates.

Each committee is composed of Council members and may include additional members elected from the WMA's regional groups. These committees meet regularly to discuss pertinent issues and make recommendations to the council.

In addition to council members, each standing committee may appoint official advisors. These advisors are experts in their respective fields and provide specialized knowledge to the committees.

World Medical Association Junior Doctors Network (WMA JDN)

The **WMA JDN** is a vibrant platform that brings together early-career doctors from around the world to engage in global health discourse, professional development, and advocacy. As an official entity of the World Medical Association (WMA), the JDN provides junior doctors with a structured avenue to contribute to the mission of promoting the highest standards in medical ethics, education, and patient care. Through a diverse and inclusive membership spanning continents, the network cultivates emerging physician leaders by offering opportunities to participate in high-level policy discussions, lead international initiatives, and represent the voice of young doctors within the broader WMA ecosystem.

The WMA JDN operates through working groups focused on key themes such as medical education, medical ethics, pandemic preparedness, planetary health, antimicrobial resistance, global surgery, and primary healthcare. These working groups serve as incubators for collaboration, research, and policy input, reinforcing the WMA's commitment to multigenerational engagement in global health governance. By bridging the gap between young professionals and senior stakeholders, the JDN not only ensures continuity in leadership but also strengthens the WMA's responsiveness to evolving health challenges. Its activities underscore the value of empowering junior doctors as catalysts for change within national and global medical associations.

WMA roles in Shaping Health Policy and Advocacy

The WMA promotes health-related human rights for all people and supports physicians as human rights advocates. The WMA plays a key role in shaping global health policies and strategies, collaborating with other organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) to address issues like health equity, access to healthcare, and public health emergencies.

The organization works with various human rights bodies to advocate for the highest standards of health for all people. Through the Istanbul Protocol, the WMA condemns any involvement of physicians in torture which is against the International Code of Ethics. The Istanbul Protocol has been adopted by the United Nations. Other key organizations, the WMA collaborate with include but not limited to : (i) the International Labour Organization (ILO) to promote physician working conditions and health workforce rights. (ii) World Federation for Medical education (WFME) to promote high standards in medical education and accreditation and (iii) Doctors without borders (MSF) to coordinate medical ethics in humanitarian work. (WMA, 2025)

To protect prisoners, the WMA developed minimum rules for the treatment of prisoners, which were later renamed "Nelson Mandela Rules," providing guidance on humane treatment of prisoners and advising physicians to refrain from participating in torture or ill treatment of prisoners.

The WMA advocates for women's right to the highest standards of health and condemns violence against women and has issued statements on female genital mutilation and WMA resolution on violence

against women and girls, encouraging national medical associations to advocate for an end to violence against women in their countries.

The WMA advocates for more medical research focused on women's health issues. Historically, medical research has often neglected gender-specific health concerns, and the WMA works to ensure that conditions like breast cancer, cervical cancer, osteoporosis, and autoimmune diseases, which disproportionately affect women, receive adequate attention. This includes encouraging the inclusion of women in clinical trials and addressing the unique health needs of women at various life stages.

Supporting African leadership at WMA

The WMA initiated the African Forum Project to bolster the capacity of African National Medical Associations (NMAs). This five-year project, which ran from 2015 to 2020, focused on areas such as organizational strengthening, medical education, universal health coverage, and addressing brain drain. Through regional workshops and collaborative partnerships, the project aimed to empower NMAs to influence national health systems effectiveness. This support has improved the participation of African leaders in WMA and increased their impact in their advocacy at country level.

Despite these advancements, African physicians have historically held fewer senior leadership positions within the WMA. Since its inception in 1947, fewer than 10 African physicians have served in senior roles.

To support regional collaborations, the African leaders formed the Coalition of National Medical Associations to provide a unified approach to addressing Africa's healthcare challenges. Through strategic partnerships, capacity-building initiatives, and collective advocacy, the coalition aims to strengthen the role of African NMAs in shaping the continent's health policies and practices.

Women leadership

While the WMA has historically had fewer women in top leadership roles compared to men, there have been significant efforts in recent decades to encourage female participation and leadership within the organization. Many female physicians and medical professionals have worked on committees, advocated for women's health, and contributed to the WMA's ethical guidelines and global health policies, particularly regarding reproductive health, maternal health, and the inclusion of women's health issues in medical research.

WMA elected its first female president Dr Kati Myllymaki a GP from Finland in 2002 - 2003 and their first African female President in 2013, with the election of Prof. Margaret Mungherera, a physician from Uganda, after which in 2020 Dr Heidi Stensmyren was elected and in 2022. Dr Lujain Alqodmani became President. Dr. Jacqueline Kitulu was elected in 2024 and will be serving her term starting October 2025. Dr. Ardis Dee Hoven, former president of the American Medical Association, became the first female chair of the WMA during its 200th council meeting.

Dr. Jacqueline Kitulu' s Journey to WMA

Dr. Kitulu made history as the first Kenyan and second African woman to be elected President of the WMA. Her tenure will focus on fostering inter-regional collaboration within WMA, advocating for strengthening primary healthcare systems, and mentorship for junior physicians.

Dr. Kitulu embarked on her medical career after earning her Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBchB) degree from the University of Nairobi in 1998.

Dr. Kitulu has held several leadership positions in Kenya's healthcare sector: including at Kenya Medical Association (KMA) where she served as the first female President from 2016 to 2020, previously holding roles as Assistant National Secretary (2012–2014) and National Vice Chair (2014–2015); Kenya Medical Women's Association (KMWA) as National Chairperson from 2008 to 2012; Kenya Red Cross Society where she served as Deputy Governor (2019–2022) and Finance Committee member (2010–2019); Board member at National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF) and Kenya Medical Practitioners and Dentists Council (KMPDC) .

Dr. Kitulu draws her inspiration to participate in WMA leadership from the late Dr. Margaret Mungherera from Uganda, who served as the first African female President of World Medical Association. Dr. Mungherera made it clear that creating change often means taking a seat at tables far away from one's professional associations and



Figure 3 : Dr. Jacqueline Kitulu during her election as WMA president in Helsinki in October 2024

countries, highlighting that the world is a global village. Dr. Kitulu quotes Sir Isaac Newton "If I have seen further, its by standing on the shoulders of giants".

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