

# HEAD OF WELLCOME-FUNDED MALAWI HEALTH PROJECT INVESTIGATED

The director has resumed his post after a bullying investigation – but some staff are not happy.

By Linda Nordling

**T**he director of a pioneering Malawi–UK research partnership, who stepped aside from his post after being investigated for bullying, returned to the role on 1 October.

Respiratory-diseases specialist Stephen Gordon is the director of the Malawi–Liverpool–Wellcome Trust Clinical Research Programme (MLW). This is a partnership between the University of Malawi College of Medicine in Blantyre, its main funder Wellcome, based in London, and the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), UK. Wellcome provided £25 million (US\$34 million) for the institute from 2018 to 2023.

When it was founded 26 years ago, the MLW was a pioneering example of collaboration between institutions in low- and high-income countries. But in recent years, some researchers have questioned the value of these partnerships for low- and middle-income countries.

The institute has conducted research into infectious diseases, including tuberculosis, HIV and, most recently, Malawi's COVID-19 response.

Gordon stepped aside from his post in April and was temporarily prevented from applying for Wellcome funding. This followed an investigation into bullying complaints from three research staff members, the findings of which have not been released. The LSTM, which employs Gordon and oversaw both the investigation and the disciplinary process, declined to provide details on the process or outcomes.

But according to interviews and evidence seen by *Nature*, the findings of the investigation confirmed several of the complaints – including excessive fault-finding and public shaming. Gordon declined *Nature's* request to be interviewed for this article about the investigation and a review of the MLW's institutional culture, which began in September.

The MLW's handling of the accusations against Gordon has angered and upset several staff – a number of whom are now nervous about his return.

A spokesperson for the LSTM confirmed that there had been a “robust investigation and disciplinary hearing” in response to grievances brought against Gordon by members of the programme's staff. The investigation was

carried out by an independent investigator with support from an external consultant.

The LSTM also said that during his time away from his post as director, Gordon would remain at the MLW as a senior scientist and continue his research. It added that there would be a “culture review” that “aims to ensure that all within the MLW community feel respected and can thrive”.

A Wellcome spokesperson said they were aware of the complaints and that the LSTM had kept the funder “fully informed as required by our bullying and harassment policy”. The spokesperson added: “We have now received a report from LSTM that demonstrates progress has been made and we have agreed the director may resume his position.”

Wellcome's anti-bullying policy, updated in February this year, says the institution can withhold funding from grantees who bully

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or harass others. The policy says grantees who engage in such behaviour can be banned from applying for future grants, and that levies can be sanctioned for institutions that fail to disclose details of such misconduct.

## Programme's divisions

One complaint about the investigation is that the academic board of the Malawi College of Medicine, which is the responsible institution for the MLW under the law in Malawi, was not notified at the time of the allegations and the subsequent investigation and disciplinary hearing.

“We should have been made aware of these issues and deliberated on and been part of the solution,” says Adamson Muula, professor of epidemiology and board member at the Malawi College of Medicine, which was recently renamed the Kamuzu University of Health Sciences. “I think our relationship should be damaged now, and it will take time to heal,” he told *Nature*. A number of people whom *Nature* spoke to echoed Muula's concerns.

In addition, *Nature* understands that Gordon's return is of concern to some of the

staff members who contributed evidence in his investigation. *Nature* has seen e-mails addressed to some of these witnesses from Gordon directly, which several people that *Nature* spoke to on condition of anonymity claim is evidence of a breach of confidentiality.

In one of the e-mails, which was sent to more than 20 recipients, Gordon apologizes for the pain and hurt caused and says he takes full responsibility. He also writes: “I am writing collectively so that witnesses might know who each other are, and communicate if needed.” He urges those with “private concerns” to e-mail him about them directly.

Muula says these e-mails raised concerns among witnesses about the disciplinary investigation, and the decisions made as a result. “The whole situation is a textbook treatise of how not to do an investigation,” he says.

A Wellcome spokesperson said the trust is satisfied that whistle-blowers had been sufficiently protected. They added: “We will review the conclusions of the forthcoming independent cultural review led by MLW based on feedback from staff and will take any further action necessary following it.”

The Gordon case comes after a staff workshop at the MLW in Malawi last year identified several weaknesses in the way the MLW programme is run. In a written report from the workshop, attendees describe an institution with high turnover, overworked staff and insufficient support. It quotes a “great divide” between European and African staff members.

The workshop heard that Malawian staff earn less than their international counterparts, and that the two groups are employed on different terms and conditions, with international staff having more pay and benefits, and different disciplinary processes.

The workshop report, which summarizes attendees' views, also says that the MLW programme is perceived by its stakeholders in Malawi as a “foreign institution”, and that it has not done well to shake off this image, “largely because it is still dominated by senior expatriate personnel”. The report says this legacy threatens the programme's sustainability, undermining its reputation and relationships in Malawi and elsewhere.

One scientist not employed by the MLW but who works with the programme told *Nature* that any attempt to review the MLW's institutional culture without rebalancing the uneven power relations between its international leadership and funders on the one hand, and its African staff on the other, would fail. “These are the systems that the victims want dismantled,” the scientist said.

The LSTM told *Nature* it was committed to “providing a safe, dignified, and inclusive working environment where every member of the community is valued and treated with respect, to ensure staff, students and partners can work towards institutional goals with shared values”.