

MENTORING THE NEXT COHORT OF YOUNG EAST AFRICAN SCIENTISTS

The East African Region must invest in grooming strong, results-oriented next generation of health research leaders to address the huge disease burden and foster strong health systems outcomes for the benefit of its population, the East Africa Health Research Commission (EAHRC) Executive Secretary Prof. Gibson Kibiki has said.

Prof. Kibiki said that the symbiotic nature of health programs across the region presents both challenges and opportunities that ought to be harnessed especially by the younger crop of research scientists for the benefit of its people.

“Strong health systems and outcomes in one partner state has a direct positive impact in the other’s, while poor health systems and outcomes threatens that of the neighbours,” said Prof. Kibiki during the launch of the Kenyan chapter of a regional mentorship programme at the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI) yesterday.

He intimated that through the mentorship programme known as the Young East Africa Research Scientists (YEARS), his commission has recruited an initial 20 outstanding young research scientists drawn from the six East African member countries that are postgraduates students in health. Indeed, one of the YEARS, Dr. Judy Mwai from Kenya has graduated with her PhD recently. The YEARS are from Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan and Kenya.

Prof. Kibiki informed that forum had the blessings of the member states as it was mooted during the 15th East Africa Community (EAC) Sectoral Council of Ministers of Health and endorsed by the 35th extraordinary Council of EAC Ministers. The forum was formerly launched during the 7th EAHRC Conference held in Tanzania in March 2019.

The 20 are distributed thus: Tanzania with six members has the highest number of representatives, followed by Kenya’s five, with three each from Burundi and Rwanda, while Uganda has two members and South Sudan one member. Those selected are required to identify at least 5 mentees who are either newly enrolled post graduate or masters’ students in health.

Speaking during the launch of the programme, the KEMRI Director General, Prof. Yeri Kombe said that mentorship in research is a key driver of success, hence the YEARS is a critical forum geared towards continually moulding young scientists for the future. “Who will empower and deliver the Universal Health Coverage in our region other than these young minds? Who will shape the future of health research, health delivery enterprise, and public health leadership...other than you younger leaders?” Prof. Kombe challenged.

“We undertake to support these and other initiatives that seek to promote the development of this crucial mass leader that will shape the future of research for health in the region for the sustainability of research in the region,” added Prof. Kombe.

This view is shared by Prof. Kibiki who further explains that the mentorship program is also aimed at producing future great leaders that are well equipped for continuity and growth of regional research institutions and academic centres.

He said that the commission has partnered with universities in the region for capacity building, to get insight on opportunities and to view technological advancements in research to offer a hands-on approach to data management.

He was disappointed that the regional up-take of medical research grants available for young research scientists in the Sub-Saharan Africa which is dominated by South Africa receiving a whopping 52 percent of the grants. “Our region has to make do with barely 48 percent and this is what this program is set out to change by equipping students with the necessary grants writing skills,” he informed.

“Research has to have an impact on society. Therefore, as researchers, it is important to enhance our grants writing skills to attract more grants and in turn, help come up with plausible health solutions for the region,” says Prof. Kombe.