

## **Availability of Essential Medicines in Malawi's Public Health Facilities: Enablers and Barriers**

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**Abstract:** Essential medicines can save lives and improve quality of life. However, shortage of essential medicines has emerged as a major health system challenge in Malawi and other developing countries. Essential medicines are not available to one-third of the world's population and half of people living in the poorest countries of Africa and Asia (WHO 2014). Shortage of essential medicines limits healthcare provider's ability to treat patients and manage disease conditions; this has huge implications for countries' health systems. Previous studies have demonstrated that shortage of some essential medicines is a chronic issue in Malawi, however, there are few studies on factors that contribute to the availability or shortage of essential medicines in Malawi's public health facilities.

This research explores the issue of shortages in Malawi's public health facilities using an exploratory sequential mixed methods design. Using a quantitative approach, this study sought to determine the availability of twelve essential medicines at 131 public health facilities across Malawi. This was followed by a qualitative study with the aim of identifying factors that contributed to the availability of the medicines in Malawi's public health facilities. The qualitative study was based on interviews with eighteen key informants. The recommendations and plan for change were informed by my conceptual model and study participant's suggestion.

This study revealed that the percent availability of essential medicines varies across the different categories of essential medicines, i.e., HIV/AIDS (99%), Malaria (94%), Family Planning (82%), other essential medicines for maternal and child health (53%). However, only nine (7%) of the 131 survey sites had all the twelve essential medicines in stock on the day of the visit. Key factors enabling the availability of essential medicines in health facilities include funding; data; governance; infrastructure; procurement and human resources. According to the key informants, the major barriers to availability of essential medicines are lack of accountability, inadequate funding, poor quality data, weak governance, poor inventory management, inefficient procurement systems, poor product selection, and inadequate human resources.

The shortage of some life-saving essential medicines in Malawi's public health facilities has dire consequences for the national health system, with significant impact on the most vulnerable population, women and children. Based on the study findings, specific recommendations are provided to support the efforts of the Government of Malawi and other stakeholders to address this urgent challenge.

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