Capacity Building for Rwandan Medical Officers in the Field of Forensic Pathology Basic Skills

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Introduction

Following the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda continues to face a myriad of challenges regarding economy, education and health as well as other socio-cultural realms. Current initiatives in the field of forensic sciences primarily focus on equipping young scientists and medical doctors with basic skills in all fields of forensic sciences to enable them to provide basic medicolegal opinions whenever called upon in courts of law.

This, however, is still not enough and doesn't conform to international standards for evidence-based medicolegal practice. For example, medicolegal autopsies carried out primarily in peripheral district hospitals are performed by young non-specialist medical officers who have only received a theoretical 3- credit forensic and legal medicine course during their undergraduate medical studies at the University of Rwanda Medical School. Even in the more specialised Rwanda Forensic Laboratory (RFL) located in the capital Kigali, medicolegal autopsies are carried out by an anatomical-pathology expert who is not board-certified in forensic pathology. This leads to challenges whenever the delivery of medicolegal expertise is required in courts of law. Additionally, without the necessary skills to respond in catastrophes and disasters, migration, or other situations of violence, the dead are not managed in a dignified manner thus posing challenges for their families wishing to have clarity about the fate of their loved ones. Equipping these medical officers with basic skills is therefore an important starting point to enable them to respond when faced with these challenges.

Objectives

This project aimed at building capacity for 50 focal, non-specialist medical officers working particularly in peripheral district hospitals in Rwanda through equipping them with basic forensic pathology skills to determine causes of death and ensure that families know the fates of their loved ones in all situations, also contributing to vital health statistics in the country.

Methodology and Results

To begin with, a survey was sent out to 50 trainees selected by the Ministry of Health from across the country, to gauge their knowledge and practical skills regarding the practice of forensic pathology including management of the dead, in their daily work routines.

80% (n=40) of the selected trainees completed the survey (Fig. 1). Of these 72.5% (n=29) were males while the remaining were females (n=11) (Fig. 2). All but one respondent were non-specialist medical officers working in public district hospitals across the country, the one specialist being an anatomic pathologist working in a university teaching hospital.

RESULTS (cont'd)

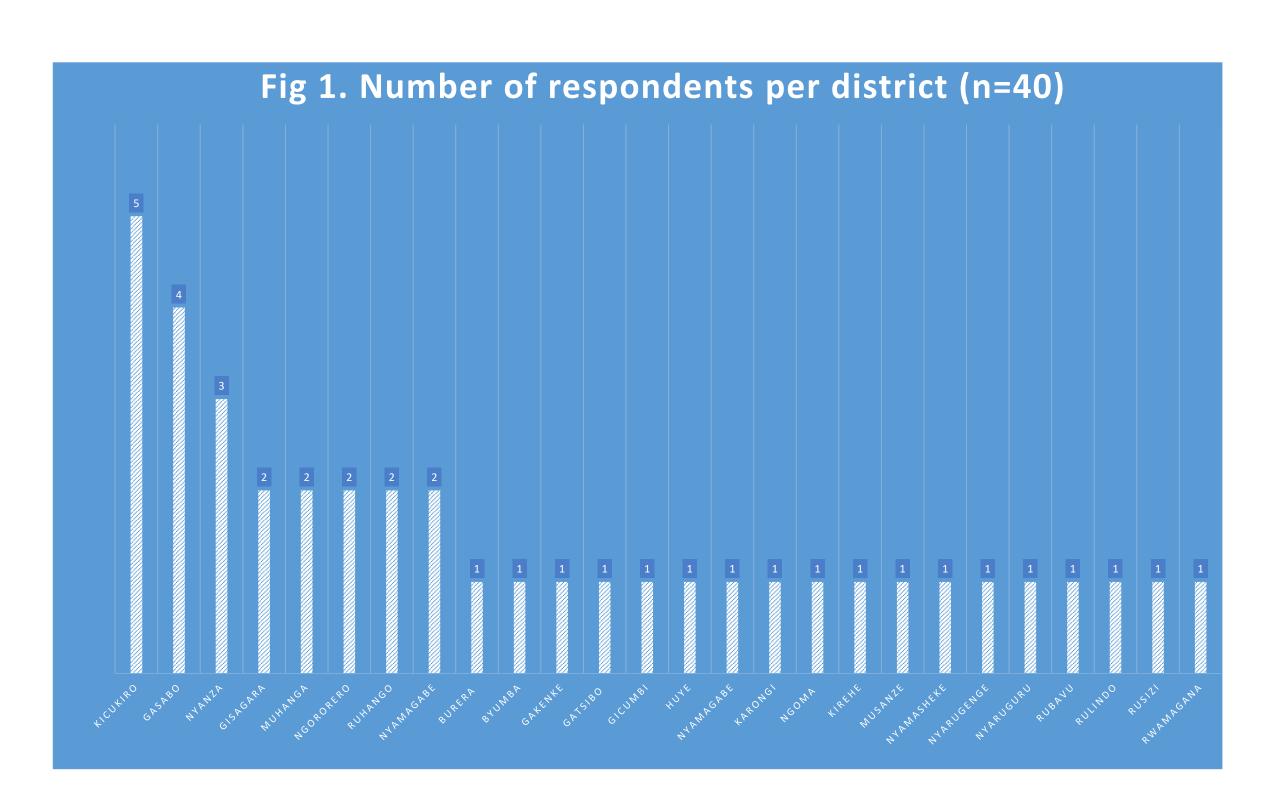
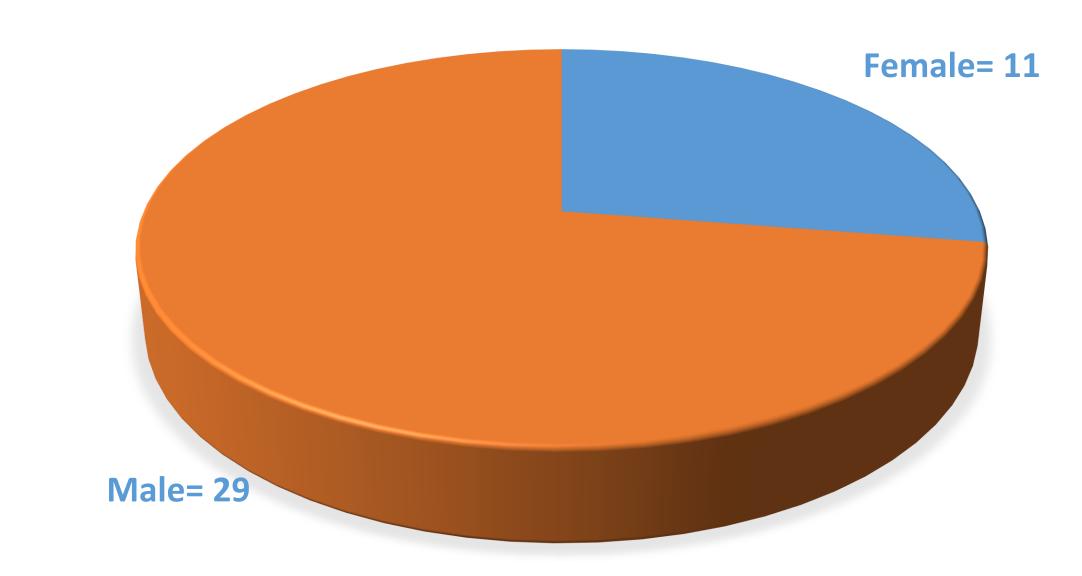


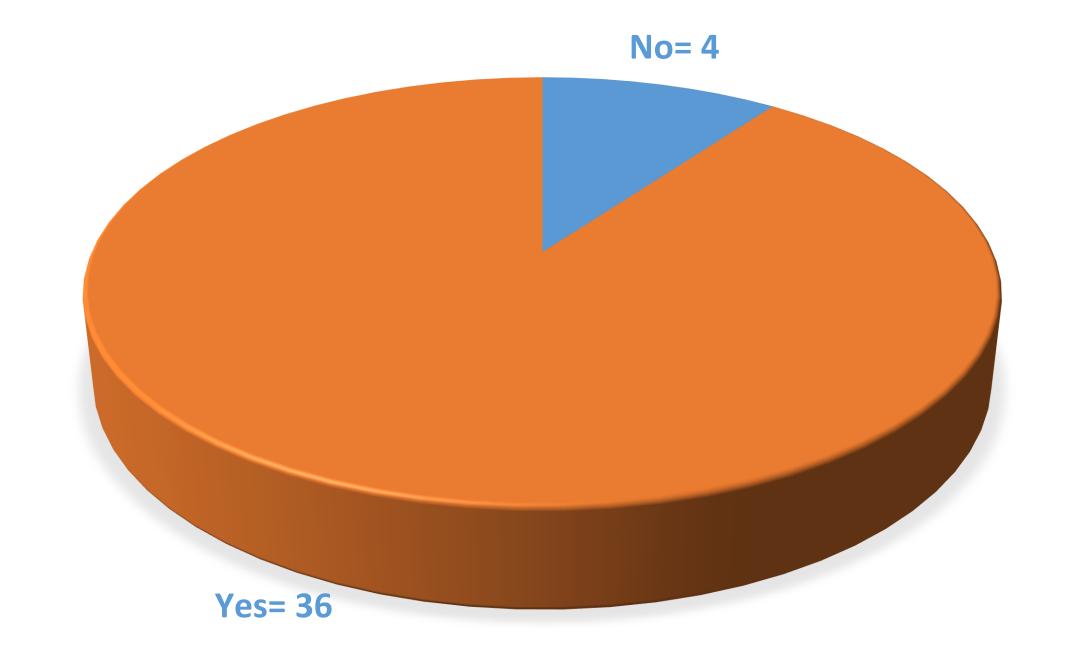
Fig 2. Distribution of respondents by sex (n=40)



Results (cont'd)

While 90 % (n=36) of the respondents reported that they were directly involved in forensic casework including management of the dead at their places of work (Fig. 3), 92.5% (n= 37) among them reported not to have had any prior training in forensic pathology, with only 3 respondents indicating that they had had some form of training through attending forensic pathology events such as meetings and conferences. None of the trainees had attained a training in counselling for those experiencing grief or breaking bad news about death

Fig. 3. Are you directly involved in work related to management of dead? (n=40)



Training Workshops

During the first three days of the workshop sessions, important aspects of medicolegal casework including death certification, external corpse examination, estimation of post-mortem interval, autopsy technique, report writing, patient consultation in cases of physical, sexual abuse, gender-based violence, child and elderly neglect were discussed. Additionally, aspects of forensic psychology such as clinical assessment, interview techniques, counselling of trauma victims and deceased's relatives were also presented and discussed with the participants. The participants were also taken through the basics of management of the dead particularly in catastrophes and natural disasters, namely: planning and coordination, health and safety for responders, allocation of unique codes, data recording, recovery and storage of dead bodies, support for families and relatives, collection of information as well proper communication with families and the media.

The last two days of the workshop were reserved for practical sessions (external and internal examination of a corpse) in which 2 autopsies were systematically performed. This gave the participants a chance not only to experience the procedure with their own eyes but also gave them an opportunity to dissect the different body organs systematically to establish any disease processes or injury patterns.

At the closure of each workshop session, the participants were handed certificates of participation and requested to act as ambassadors and also disseminate the knowledge gained to their peers in their respective places of work during the weekly staff meetings.

The trainings were accredited with 21 Continuous Professional Development (CPD) points by the Rwanda Medical and Dental Council which is the professional body that regulates medical practice in the country.

Participant feedback and Conclusion

All workshops were well-attended and participants demonstrated enthusiasm and eagerness to learn during both oral and practical sessions. They noted that such workshops were long overdue and ought to be extended to all medical practitioners, particularly those working in district hospitals. The team of trainers promised them that this would be advocated for at the level of the ministry of health as well as continuing to solicit for funding both locally and internationally to ensure that more practitioners are trained. In the meantime, the trained participants were requested to be ambassadors at their places of work and ensure that the knowledge acquired is disseminated to their peers.

Participants also indicated that a one-week workshop was not enough for them to learn more of the skills and deepen their practice and hence suggested that when possible, another workshop/course ought to be organised to ensure ample time particularly for practical sessions.

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