

# Expanding Headache Care at a Primary-care Level in Africa: The second ROPE-IHS Initiative in Malawi

Report regarding the second edition

Empowering primary health care in sub-Saharan Africa.  
National and regional teaching course

THE REGIONAL OUTREACH PROGRAMME OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL HEADACHE SOCIETY (ROPE-IHS)



International  
Headache Society

**2nd On-site Training Event of the ROPE-IHS initiative**

Education on non-communicable diseases (NCD) in primary care:  
headache, head pain syndromes, migraine and related disorders



February 13<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup>, 2025  
Blantyre, Malawi



The Malawi Government



patients seek care from clinical officers (COs), non-physician clinicians who manage most primary care services in rural areas. Unfortunately, these professionals often lack formal neurology training and mentorship, relying on outdated guidelines that fail to address modern headache management.

The **DREAM Program** (<https://www.dream-health.org>) has been instrumental in providing high-quality clinics for communicable and non-communicable diseases across 10 African countries. Over the 2 decades of activities, it has been pivotal in providing educational courses to the local health care providers acting in DREAM's clinics as well as those run by the different governments. By integrating its well-established educational framework with IHS expertise in headache medicine, this initiative aims to equip COs with the necessary skills to diagnose and treat headache disorders effectively, ensuring sustainable access to neurological care.



## The Second Training Event: Building on Success

Following the success of the first edition in 2022, the second training course expanded to three days and introduced a “train-the-trainer” model to reinforce sustainability. Thirty COs attended, including five previous participants – one doctor and four clinical officers from four DREAM centres of both rural and urban areas of the country - who returned as lecturers alongside IHS neurologists from Italy (dr Massimo Leone and dr Daniele Martinelli) and Ghana (dr Freda Dodd-Glover).

The curriculum covered neurological examination, primary and secondary headache disorders, and management strategies. Interactive sessions and case discussions ensured that COs could apply their new knowledge in clinical practice. A mentorship program further strengthened this approach, with IHS faculty conducting on-site field visits to CO-run clinics in rural Malawi (more than 80% of the population live in rural areas).

The **Regional Outreach Programme (ROPE)** of the International Headache Society (IHS) recently conducted its second African training event on headache medicine in Blantyre, Malawi, in February 2025. Organized in partnership with the Disease Relief through Excellent and Advanced Means (DREAM) Program that conducts since many years a well-established Educational Program on Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) in Primary Care in partnership with the Malawi's Government National Education Plan.

Malawi, a low-income country in southeastern Africa, faces a severe shortage of healthcare providers, with only three neurologists for a population of 21 million. The majority of headache



Pre-course assessments revealed significant gaps in headache knowledge, with median scores below 45%. After training, scores improved by 18 percentage points, with over 50% of participants achieving scores above 60%. Participants praised the course for its quality and interactive approach.

**The initiative underscores the vital role of task-shifting in addressing Africa’s neurological care crisis.** By reinforcing training, expanding reach, leveraging technology, and advocating for better access to care, this initiative has the potential to transform headache management in resource-limited settings, ensuring a sustained and scalable impact

Task shifting in neurology—and particularly in the headache field—is not a strategy to be feared but one to be actively guided and promoted. By investing in education, fostering partnerships between international scientific societies and reliable local healthcare providers, and ensuring the practical application of knowledge through shared work on the ground, we can create a sustainable model for high-quality headache care in areas not served by neurologists. The success of existing programs provides a strong foundation for future expansion and development, ensuring that access to neurological care is no longer a privilege but a global standard.

