

Edinburgh frontline NHS doctor heads to Harvard

An Edinburgh frontline NHS doctor has won a prestigious global surgery fellowship at Harvard University's Medical School.

Dr Isioma Okolo is a specialist registrar in obstetrics and gynaecology with a special interest in women's global health, which will be the [focus of a two year Masters in Public Health she will undertake at the famous Boston university.](#)

The Paul Farmer Global Surgery Fellowship was created to train leaders who will promote surgical care, education, and research pertinent to global surgery, anaesthesia, and obstetrics and gynaecology care in resource-poor settings around the world.

During the fellowship and masters programme Dr Okolo will research the cause of higher mortality rates in black women during pregnancy and will examine the use of caesarean surgery in Sub Saharan Africa, where women have the highest risk of death during childbirth but lack access to caesareans or are offered intervention too late.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic Dr Okolo has commuted from her home in south Edinburgh to work 12 hour shifts alongside colleagues at the Victoria Hospital in Kirkcaldy.

Since graduating from the University of Edinburgh's highly acclaimed medical school nine years ago she has extended her expertise with periods of volunteering and carrying out research work in Uganda, Tanzania, Brazil and in her home country Nigeria.



Dr Isioma Okolo at work in Uganda.

She said “I’m an obstetrics and gynaecologist registrar in my sixth year of a seven year training programme and as a south east Scotland trainee I have worked around different hospitals, including Edinburgh Royal Infirmary and St John’s at Livingston. I am very lucky to work at the Victoria and while you naturally worry about the risk of Covid-19, going to work is helping to keep me sane during this lockdown period.

“Growing up in Nigeria and Togo, I was always aware of the inequalities caused by social and economic factors. I was particularly disturbed by the maternal mortality rate and the extreme disparity in the health of pregnant women and new-born babies, despite the universality of childbirth, and this got me interested in women’s health.

“Our job is so demanding that it is quite easy as a clinician to get very task focussed and it becomes difficult to think of your own role in a global context. With one more year of training to complete, I wanted to have a pause and to really develop the interest I have in global women’s health, so I am

delighted and honoured to have been accepted on to this very prestigious fellowship.”



Dr Isioma Okolo is a specialist registrar in obstetrics and gynaecology. Pic by www.pennmann.co.uk

Harvard Medical School was established in 1782 and has produced thousands of leaders who shape the fields of science and medicine with their expertise and cutting-edge research work. Faculty members have been making paradigm-shifting discoveries and achieving “firsts” since 1799, when Professor Benjamin Waterhouse introduced the smallpox vaccine to the United States. Harvard’s accomplishments are recognised internationally and 15 researchers have shared in nine Nobel prizes for work completed while at the School.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic Dr Okolo will begin her studies and research working remotely from Edinburgh, but she hopes that she will be able to take up residence on the Boston campus early next year.

She added: “In being given this amazing opportunity to complete the fellowship and masters degree at Harvard, it allows me to work with so many different people across different sectors such as health, finance, medicine and surgery, and I can only benefit from that rich diversity of experience and background.



Dr Isioma Okolo on a research trip in Uganda.

“One thing that clinicians who do a masters are encouraged to do, is to look at your practicum (project), from a different perspective and while my practicum will focus on maternal mortality, and specifically racial disparity, I will be looking to figure out a way of how to view it through a non-clinical lens.

“The fellowship is targeted at doctors and surgeons in obstetrics and gynaecology and while it will obviously increase my academic skills, it also focuses on improving skills in areas like leadership quality, policy making, administration and the management of projects and programmes.”

Dr Okolo is raising funds to finance her Harvard studies which are self-financing and has launched a Go Fund Me page.

“It is very expensive but will be so worthwhile and I am so grateful for all the support I have had from friends, colleagues and especially my family who have been tremendous.”

<https://www.gofundme.com/f/help-isi-fight-maternal-mortality>