

Malawi: "Ambulance drivers risk contracting the virus in the line of duty"

The festive season is among the busiest times of the year for Malawi's ambulance drivers, with accidents due to drunk driving common. IRIN spoke to Matthias Kalima, 43, who will be on call over the Christmas period.

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"We face so many challenges as we transport patients to clinics. My worry is that most ambulance drivers are not protected from infections. Sometimes we handle cases of accident victims who are bleeding - with no gloves you end up handling such cases with bare hands.

"Chances are that you can contract HIV or other dangerous infections. My fellow drivers have complained about this, but most bosses are always reluctant to take action.

"Take the month of December [2008] - people party and there are so many accidents on our roads. Our predicament is similar to that of traffic police officers. Just like us, they also handle dead bodies, people who are bleeding sometimes, without gloves due to circumstances.

"December is one of the months when we have the highest number of accidents. We are called any time, even in the middle of the night, to ferry the sick, the injured or even corpses to the hospital.

"Sometimes couples fight and heck each other. It is our responsibility, even when we are having some good time with friends, to cut short the celebrations and take the injured to hospital.

"Just today, I woke up at 3 a.m. because there was a maternity case. I had to drive the expectant mother to the clinic - I have no option.

"Much as we are also entitled to happiness and celebration on Christmas, ambulance drivers appear not to be part of it. I don't remember the last time I celebrated Christmas with my family. They just got used to it.

"Perhaps our organisations should employ more ambulance drivers so that we work on shifts. Ambulance drivers lack motivation. Despite the onerous duties that we discharge, our perks are meagre. This is one of the reasons most people are not willing to be employed as ambulance drivers.

"We are more than ambulance drivers; we do humanitarian work, and society should start looking at us from that angle. An ambulance driver is more than just a mere driver - we save lives!

"Come Christmas time, everyone will be celebrating and partying, while we will be on the road with our sirens wailing as we try to save lives, or we carry the dead to the morgue.

"Something ought to be done to improve our working conditions. We need better equipment, we need gloves all the time, we need better salaries.

"Apart from better salaries we also need risk allowance. Yes, with the high prevalence of HIV, ambulance drivers risk contracting the virus in the line of duty. Most people turn a blind eye to this.

"If you ask me where I will be on Christmas, I will tell you that I will probably be on one of our highways. Christmas or no Christmas, it will be business as usual for me."

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