

Stepping back to step forward: Scholarships to support the completion of secondary school as a way to increase the number of nurses and midwives in Sierra Leone

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INTRODUCTION

One of the primary factors contributing to Sierra Leone’s high maternal and neonatal mortality is the **dearth of nurses and midwives**. The cost of the West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), a prerequisite for nursing programs, is a major financial impediment for those considering nursing and midwifery. To address this barrier, Partners In Health (PIH) and University of California San Francisco (UCSF) Global Action in Nursing (GAIN) provided funding for 37 certificate-level providers to attend 15 weeks of evening and weekend classes to study and take the WASSCE. This scholarship program aimed to increase the number of providers eligible to **upgrade from certificate to diploma or bachelor-level nurse-midwifery education**.

Eligibility criteria included minimum two years’ service with PIH at Koidu Government Hospital (KGH), an above average performance evaluation, and commitment to return to KGH upon degree completion.

METHODS

- Scholars were supported with exam registration fees and provided their exam results following score notification
- To be eligible for nursing school, scholars must pass English and chemistry
- Those who did not pass English and chemistry were considered to fail and could retake the exam in 2023

RESULTS

- Fourteen (38%) of 37 scholars passed their WASSCE within one month of completing classes.
- Of 14 scholars who passed, four were accepted into and are pursuing Bachelor of Science nursing programs with specialties in critical (2) and perioperative (2) care.
- Following graduation, those 4 graduates will be the first critical and perioperative care nurses at KGH.
- Five scholars are being supported to upgrade their education from certificate-level State Enrolled Community Health Nurses (SECHN) to three-year diploma-level State Registered Nurses (SRN).
- Of 23 (62%) who did not pass on first try, they had the opportunity to retake the exam in June 2023.
- In June 2023, eight scholars who did not pass in 2022 re-sat for the exam; six (75%) passed.
- Potential barriers to a passing score include teacher absences, competing work schedules, and family commitments.

DISCUSSION

Scholarships for post-secondary school nursing programs could be an effective way to increase the number of clinical providers in the health system. Barriers to education and career advancement can start early and should be addressed starting at the secondary education level.



GAIN scholars studying at Korle Bu College of Nursing and Ridge College of Anesthesia in Ghana.



Two GAIN scholars who successfully completed WASSCE classes and are now in the 3-year diploma program at St John of God Lunsar to become State Registered Nurses.

