

World Health Organization recognition for Global Surgery Policy Unit

From Somaliland to the WHO, the GSPU is advancing safe, equitable surgery worldwide through research and policy.



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The Global Surgery Policy Unit (GSPU) is a joint venture between the Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS England) and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Launched in 2023 and led by co-directors Dr Rocco Friebe (LSE) and Miss Rachel Hargest (RCS England), the GSPU has recently been awarded World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Centre status.

Over the past three years, the GSPU has conducted research, education, public engagement, policy and advocacy activities in line with its purpose to advance global public health, surgical, obstetric and

anaesthesia care, with a particular focus on low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The GSPU leverages the joint expertise of the two partners in clinical surgery and health policy and economics to strengthen health systems to deliver high-quality surgical services, training and workforce development, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

The GSPU has been working with the WHO to generate evidence for the assessment, integration and monitoring of the World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution on emergency, critical and operative care (WHA76.2), often referred to as the ECO resolution.

In 2024, Dr Friebe and Miss Hargest were invited to lead focus group discussions with stakeholders at the WHO headquarters in Geneva in order to determine priorities relating to the ECO resolution. This resulted in the GSPU being commissioned to provide the evidence that will inform the WHO's global action plan for ECO. As a result, the WHO recently designated the GSPU as

the WHO Collaborating Centre for Health Policy and Impact in Emergency, Critical and Operative Care for a period of four years.

The GSPU has also partnered with local organisations to strengthen surgical services for children in Somaliland. Working with the Somaliland Ministry of Health Development (MOHD), Amoud University, hospitals in Hargeisa and six districts, this Elrha-funded programme focused on improving treatment for children with burns and appendicitis. The programme began in November 2023 with training seminars covering research methods and clinical skills. Healthcare workers started collecting data on how children with these conditions were being treated. Community engagement events helped raise awareness about when children need surgical care. The programme concluded with Somaliland's first surgical research conference in September 2024, where participants shared what they had learnt.

Throughout the programme, healthcare workers participated in regular online

the programme's benefits continue beyond the initial funding period.

The GSPU built strong working relationships with the MOHD during this time. These relationships continued despite a change in government, and the GSPU has been invited to participate in policy discussions. One key area involves reviewing current laws about consent for emergency Caesarean sections as women in Somaliland cannot at present provide their own consent. In addition, the GSPU recently received funding from Global Health Partnerships to further support local healthcare workers in maternal and child health.

The GSPU is currently undertaking a project funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research to improve prevention and management of injuries in children in Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Collaborators include Professor Godfrey Muguti (Harare, Zimbabwe), Dr Godfrey Sama (Dar es Salaam, Tanzania) and Professor Kokila Lakhoo – chief investigator (Oxford, UK). The project aims to reduce

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teaching sessions and discussed challenging cases together. The programme helped establish the technology and systems needed for hospitals to connect and learn from each other. Local surgeons and faculty received training in both clinical care and research methods. Importantly, these local healthcare professionals now lead their own teaching sessions and case discussions, ensuring that

mortality and morbidity from childhood injuries, and to build up capacity for surgical research, by training a cadre of PhD students and supervisors in the surgical departments of the respective universities.

Surgery for children has been a focus of the GSPU's research work and advocacy and policy initiatives. We were invited to the House of Lords by Baroness Finlay to

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participate in a meeting to highlight the importance of providing safe and appropriate surgery for children in LMICs.

The GSPU also offers educational opportunities for surgeons and other doctors, from both the UK and LMICs, who have carried out research projects under the supervision of Dr Friebe and Miss Hargest. During 2022–2024, Mr Gerard McKnight undertook an MD degree looking at the training needs of the surgical workforce in Somaliland, as well as coordinating the Delphi process by which the definition of humanitarian surgery was determined and published.¹ Dr Swati Jain (neurosurgeon and PhD student in Cambridge) is currently researching the costs of managing traumatic head injuries in Zambia. Dr Sabrina Wimmer (surgical resident and PhD student at LSE) has recently published her work on the global burden of emergency and operative conditions.² Multiple master's degree students from LSE Department of Health

Policy programmes have participated in summer projects with the GSPU, and two RCS England humanitarian surgery innovation fellows have undertaken studies on the cost of surgical training in Africa as well as the effects on the local surgical workforce of incoming surgical response teams in areas of conflict in the Middle East and North Africa.

In 2025, the GSPU began a collaboration with Einstein Hospital Israelita in Sao Paulo. Two fellows (GSPU–Einstein fellows) will join the unit for oversight of their work on improving the use of surgical outcomes data, and training in research methodology and quality improvement.

There have also been several lectures as part of the LSE public engagement series, which bring matters of debate in the global surgery field to a multidisciplinary audience. The next lecture features Professor Emmanuel Makasa and will take place on 8 October 2025 (hybrid).

Moreover, the GSPU has been invited by London Global Cancer Week to host events on the financing of global cancer care. The next event on 'Financing Cancer Care in an Era of Dwindling International Aid' will take place on 11 November 2025 at RCS England in London (and online), and will feature a high-profile faculty of health economists and the former health minister of Ukraine. The seminar is FREE TO ATTEND, in person or online. Registration is required: <https://bit.ly/gspu-cancer-seminar>.

As with the WHO, it is essential that the GSPU continues to provide policy makers with the evidence that makes the case for investment in surgery. To that end, our researchers, Dr Meskerem Kebede, Dr Martilord Ifeanyiichi and Ms Maeve Bognini, have led the research agenda, resulting in important publications addressing issues of workforce, financing and priority setting.^{3–7} Working with the WHO opens a new set of

opportunities for the GSPU to continue to advocate for investment in surgery with the aim of improving services for all who require safe, timely and affordable surgery.

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