

Medics as influencers: a historical analysis of British Army Military Medical Exercises in Kenya over two decades

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Summary: The concept of Defence Healthcare Engagement (DHE) was established in 2015, outlining the use of UK Defence Medical Services (DMS) capabilities to achieve influence in the health sector. Prior to this, DHE activity has been undertaken in myriad ways over many years, often without formalised assessment, monitoring and evaluation (AME) of its impact. Annual British Army medical training exercises have run in Kenya since the early 1990s, initially with a dual purpose – to deliver the Kenyan Extended Programme of Immunisation in remote locations and to undertake austere training. This provided a specific response to a capability gap request from the partner nation, but as this gap has closed, the exercise changed in a variety of ways. Our aim was to qualitatively evaluate the impact of these exercises on the Kenyan healthcare system and on the influence and relationships between the nations.

Methods-Results: Semi-structured interviews were conducted for ten former senior commanders and medical officers who had deployed in key command and clinical positions from 1993 to 2019. Three researchers conducted thematic content analysis on the key-informant interviews. Five main domains were identified: the intent of all involved parties; the planning involved in terms of continuity, integration and AME; the relationships throughout the exercise; the impact on relationships, health outcomes, the local community and DMS training; and lessons learnt.

Conclusion: No prior systematic academic analysis of this longstanding DHE activity has occurred. This study should aid our understanding of the requirements for successful future DHE interventions, including the importance of intelligence-led activity, as part of a long-term enduring country-specific engagement strategy supported by robust AME. Further research is required to fully understand the impact of DHE activities, in particular qualitative research from a partner nation perspective.