

Executive Director's Message: Building on Resilience in 2026



BHP Executive Director, Dr Gaerolwe Masheto

As the Botswana Harvard Health Partnership (BHP) begins 2026, Executive Director Dr Gaerolwe Masheto has called on staff to embrace the new year with renewed hope, shared purpose, and confidence in the institution's collective strength.

In his New Year message to colleagues, Dr Masheto extended warm wishes to BHP staff and their families, while paying special tribute to team members who remained on duty during the festive season shutdown. He commended their dedication to safeguarding institutional resources, maintaining infrastructure, and ensuring the uninterrupted continuity of essential research operations and protocols.

Reflecting on the year gone by, Dr Masheto acknowledged that the past year presented unexpected challenges, testing the institution's resilience. Despite this, he noted that

BHP staff remained steadfast in their commitment to advancing science, safeguarding study participants, maintaining data quality, mentoring emerging leaders, and upholding the highest standards of research integrity.

"These efforts did more than sustain BHP; they strengthened it," he said, adding that the institution's impact is ultimately defined by the people who carry out its mission every day.

Dr Masheto emphasised that every interaction with a study participant, every dataset protected, every student mentored, and every innovation advanced contributes to a broader mission of improving lives and shaping the future of health in Botswana, the region, and globally.

Looking ahead to 2026, the Executive Director outlined key priorities for the year, including strengthening institutional

sustainability, expanding strategic partnerships, investing in people and priority infrastructure, and embracing innovation. Central to these efforts, he said, is the continued cultivation of a culture grounded in trust, accountability, collaboration, innovation, and excellence.

He encouraged staff to use the new year as an opportunity to think boldly, work smarter, support one another, and lead with integrity, noting that each individual plays a vital role in shaping the next chapter of BHP's journey.

Dr Masheto concluded by thanking staff for their resilience, dedication, and belief in BHP's mission, expressing confidence that together the institution will continue to create meaningful impact, inspire change, and leave a lasting legacy of excellence.

Chair of BHP Board of Members Tours BHP Facilities



Prof Elliott pose for a picture with the Pharmacy and HPTN/GSK Team

The Chair of the Botswana Harvard Health Partnership (BHP) Board of Members and Vice Provost for International Affairs at Harvard University, Professor Mark C. Elliott, accompanied by Board of Directors member Dr Shahin Lockman and BHP Executive Director Dr Gaerolwe Masheto, conducted a familiarisation tour of BHP facilities on 27 January 2026. The tour aimed to provide first-hand insight into the clinical and laboratory research environments in which BHP studies are conducted. It also formed part of broader Board engagements with BHP staff and research teams, aimed at deepening the Board's understanding of operational realities and ensuring that governance decisions are informed by on-the-ground perspectives.

The visit took place a day ahead of the BHP Annual General Meeting (AGM) held on Wednesday, 28 January 2026, where key governance, strategic, and operational matters of the Partnership were discussed. The facility tour formed part of the Board's ongoing commitment to strengthening oversight, governance, and support for BHP's clinical and research programmes.

The tour focused on clinical and research sites in Gaborone and Molepolole. During the visits, Professor Elliott interacted directly with study teams and received

briefings on ongoing studies, operational achievements, and challenges encountered in the implementation of research activities.

The January 2026 tour reflects the BHP Board's hands-on approach to governance and its dedication to engaging with staff to ensure that research conducted under the Partnership continues to meet the highest standards while responding effectively to the needs of researchers, study participants, and the broader health system.

Earlier in the day, ahead of the facility tour, Professor Elliott, accompanied by Dr Masheto and Dr Lockman, paid a courtesy call on the Acting Permanent Secretary of Health, Dr Mareko Ramotsababa, at the Ministry of Health. The Ministry's delegation included the Acting Director of Health Services, Dr Oratile Mfokeng-Selei, and Dr Rex Segadimo, Acting Secretary of Specialised Health Care.

The meeting reaffirmed the strong partnership between BHP and the Government of Botswana and underscored a shared commitment to advancing high-quality, ethical, and impactful health research in support of national health priorities.



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Prof. Elliott Commends Study Coordinators for Resilience and Excellence



Professor Mark C. Elliott

The Chair of the Botswana Harvard Health Partnership (BHP) Board of Members, Professor Mark C. Elliott, on Wednesday evening, 28 January 2026, hosted a dinner for BHP Study Coordinators at the Avani Hotel, creating a platform for engagement, reflection, and dialogue on the implementation of BHP-supported studies.

The dinner brought together Study Coordinators and Principal Investigators from various clinical and research programmes, as well as support services leadership. The informal yet focused engagement provided an opportunity to recognise the Study Coordinators' contributions and to network openly as a team.

During the engagement, Professor Elliott commended the Study Coordinators for their central role in the successful delivery of BHP's research agenda, emphasising that their leadership and coordination efforts are critical to maintaining high standards of ethical, scientific, and operational excellence.

"With the modest resources that you have, you are doing an amazing and tremendous amount of great research," said Professor Elliott.

Reflecting on the past year, he acknowledged the challenges faced by the institution, particularly funding constraints, and praised the team's resilience.

"Sometimes we go through change, change that we do not necessarily welcome, but we must face those challenges and turn them into opportunities. This is exactly what you did amid funding cuts. If last year did not teach us anything, then we should reflect," he said. He concluded his remarks by encouraging teamwork and mutual support. "You must continue taking care of each other as a team and continue doing the great work that you do," he said, ending with his signature closing: "Thank you for making Harvard great."

BHP Executive Director, Dr Gaerolwe Masheto, also expressed appreciation for the Study Coordinators and support staff, noting that the organisation is in a stronger position than it was in mid-2025. "With all the challenges we faced last year, you, the teams running the studies, and the support staff, pulled together with enduring commitment to ensure that we survived. Thank you for the efforts, and let us continue working together to ensure that we keep improving," he said.

Additional messages of appreciation were delivered by Dr Shahin Lockman, who thanked the team for their dedication. Professor Joseph Makhema added that, with the strong cadre of Principal Investigators at BHP, the institution is well positioned for continued growth. "I look forward to this new team of investigators and administrators taking us into the new BHP. We will defy the challenges," he said.

Dr Tuelo Mogashoa Successfully Defends PhD in TB Genomics



Dr Tuelo Mogashoa

Dr Tuelo Mogashoa has successfully defended her Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Molecular Biology (Tuberculosis Genomics) at Stellenbosch University following a virtual oral examination held on 12 January 2025. Her doctoral thesis is titled ***“Rifampicin-resistant tuberculosis: an emerging threat to human health in Botswana.”***

Dr Mogashoa is the first of seven PhD fellows from the inaugural cohort of the TESA Addressing Gender and Diversity Regional Gaps in Clinical Research Capacity (TAGENDI) programme to successfully complete her doctoral studies. The TAGENDI fellowship is implemented under the Trials of Excellence in Southern Africa (TESA) Network.

As part of the PhD requirements, Dr Mogashoa was expected to produce four manuscripts, with at least two published in peer-reviewed journals. She has met this requirement, having published two peer-reviewed articles arising from her doctoral work, with a third manuscript accepted for publication and a fourth currently under review.

Reflecting on the milestone, Dr Mogashoa expressed gratitude for the support she received throughout her doctoral journey.

“I feel deeply honoured and grateful to be the first TAGENDI PhD fellow to complete the programme; it still feels almost unbelievable. It is indeed a proud moment, and this achievement reflects the strength of the TAGENDI programme, the mentorship and training support I received, and the dedication required to complete doctoral training. I hope it will encourage other fellows to complete their PhD journeys,” she said. She described the successful completion of her PhD as a significant personal and professional milestone, representing years of intensive training, long hours in the laboratory, rigorous data analysis, perseverance, and growth as a researcher.

“It has strengthened my ability to lead independent research, supervise and mentor emerging scientists, and contribute meaningfully to TB research and public health impact, particularly in molecular epidemiology,” she added.

Looking ahead, Dr Mogashoa’s short-term priorities include finalising additional manuscripts from her doctoral work, organising a dissemination session for key stakeholders, and strengthening collaborations to translate research findings into programme-relevant action.

In the medium term, she plans to pursue a postdoctoral fellowship and expand her research on drug-resistant tuberculosis, including the characterisation of non-tuberculous mycobacteria using whole-genome sequencing and advanced bioinformatic analyses.

“Ultimately, my aspiration is to become a research leader who helps strengthen genomics capacity and evidence-based TB control in Botswana and the region,” she said.



Bonolo Wins Afrique Research Support Hub Seed Funding Award



Dr Bonolo Phinius (Right) receives a certificate of participation

Dr Bonolo Phinius, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Botswana Harvard Health Partnership (BHP) based at the Botswana Sexual and Reproductive Health Initiative (BSRHI), has been named one of only 10 recipients of the Early Career Researcher (ECR) Seed Funding Award from the Afrique Research Support Hub (ARSH) – Southern Africa Region.

Dr Phinius was selected for the Afrique Research Support Hub (ARSH) 12-month Mentorship Programme in November 2025. The announcement of her Seed Funding Award follows a week-long Grants Writing Workshop held in Durban, South Africa, from 26 to 30 January 2026, which brought together mentees from across the region.

Selection for the in-person workshop was highly competitive. ARSH mentees were required to submit a research proposal that was rigorously assessed on relevance, feasibility, research focus, collaboration potential, applicant capacity, and responsiveness to multiple rounds of reviewer feedback, culminating in a revised proposal submission.

Dr Phinius's successful proposal, titled "Early Steps, Big

Hopes: Elimination of HIV Acquisition in Pregnant and Postpartum Women: Experiences With and Preferences for PrEP Care in Botswana," is embedded within BSRHI's ongoing STEP-UP NIH R01 study and is linked to several other BHP-supported projects.

The ARSH Programme, supported by The Wellcome Trust and implemented in partnership with the Africa Health Research Institute (AHRI) in South Africa and the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) in Kenya, is a capacity-strengthening initiative designed to train, mentor, and support post-PhD African researchers in securing competitive international research funding.

BSRHI Director, Professor Chelsea Morroni, together with BHP leadership, congratulated Dr Phinius on the well-deserved award. Professor Morroni also acknowledged the contributions of Dr Aamirah Mussa and Yasmin Dunkley, who supported Dr Phinius throughout the process.

"Building a research career takes a village, and I am deeply grateful and proud of our little village," said Professor Morroni.

Thembi Encourages Fellow Scientists to Pursue Graduate Studies



Thembinkosi Shadreck

Former BHP Scientist Thembinkosi “Thembi” Shadreck, who is currently pursuing a Master’s degree in Molecular Medicine at the Cyprus Institute of Neurology and Genetics (CING), has encouraged fellow scientists at the Botswana Harvard Health Partnership (BHP) to consider enrolling in graduate studies to broaden their skills and career prospects.

Thembi is a recipient of the Cyprus Institute of Neurology and Genetics (CING) Scholarship, awarded in 2025 and jointly supported by the Cyprus Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She joined BHP in January 2024 as a laboratory volunteer and was later appointed Laboratory Scientist in August 2024, a role she held until August 2025. Her master’s programme focuses on the molecular pathology of disease, with an emphasis on translational research.

“This training will strengthen my expertise in molecular diagnostics, disease mechanisms, and translational research, enabling me to contribute more effectively to high-quality research at BHP and nationally,” she said. “The hands-on training will also advance my laboratory skills and support capacity building through the transfer of molecular techniques.”

She added that the programme will enhance her ability to conduct research that informs population-level health strategies for both complex and monogenic diseases. Her training includes advanced genomics and other omics sciences, molecular diagnostics, biomarker discovery, and big data analysis.

“Upon returning, I intend to apply these skills to improve laboratory protocols, support the development of molecular diagnostics, and contribute to research that informs public health interventions,” said Thembi. “I also hope to share my knowledge with younger scientists at tertiary level through teaching and training.”

Reflecting on her journey, Thembi noted that exposure to BHP’s strong academic environment shifted her perception of postgraduate education.

“Growing up, I believed that attaining a master’s or PhD was out of reach. However, during my time at BHP, I witnessed many PhD graduations, which changed my mindset. With the right support and guidance, both of which are abundant at BHP, postgraduate study is achievable,” she said.

She encouraged colleagues to view further education as an investment in personal and professional growth, emphasising that graduate training enables scientists to stay abreast of rapidly evolving scientific tools, align with BHP's mission, and collaborate more broadly.

Applications for the CING Scholarship for September 2026 are now open for three Batswana to pursue master's degrees in Molecular Medicine, Medical Genetics, Biotechnology, or Neuroscience. The scholarship is fully funded, including a monthly stipend. Thembi encouraged eligible candidates to apply.

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Meanwhile, another BHP Scientist, Thato Pheny, who graduated with a BSc in Biological Sciences and Biotechnology from the Botswana International University of Science & Technology (BIUST) in 2024, has been awarded the prestigious African STARS Fellowship to pursue a Master's degree in Bioinformatics of Infectious Diseases at Stellenbosch University. Thato is one of the seven African STARS fellows selected for this programme.

The African STARS Fellowship Programme aims to develop the next generation of African leaders in genomics, diagnostics, vaccine design, and biotechnology innovation. Fellows are expected to gain advanced technical expertise, leadership skills, and career development opportunities in cutting-edge fields essential for strengthening Africa's health sector.



Thato Pheny

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