Update in Anaesthesia

Review

WFSA Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Programme: Improving Patient Safety Through Knowledge and Experience Exchange

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INTRODUCTION

Anaesthesia plays a fundamental role in patient safety and comfort during surgical procedures. However, the anaesthesia landscape varies significantly worldwide, influenced by factors such as healthcare infrastructure, professional training models, cultural norms, and economic aspects. Differences in the density of professionals create an additional challenge, as do the varying training models for new practitioners.

According to The Global Anaesthesia Workforce Study,[1] published by the World Federation of Societies of Anaesthesiologists (WFSA), there are currently 669,735 anaesthesia providers worldwide, with a global density of 8.8 providers per 100,000 population. When considering physician anaesthesiologists, this density drops to 7.6 per 100,000 population. These figures vary by region; for example, the African region has an anaesthesia density of just 0.6 per 100,000 population, whereas the European region has a density of 20.9 per 100,000. This disparity presents a significant challenge to professional training and qualification, particularly for younger professionals and in regions with a lower density of physicians.

Mentoring in medicine has long been recognised as a valuable tool for academic and professional development. The concept of mentoring dates back over 3,000 years and was first described in Greek mythology when Homer's Odyssey entrusted his teenage son to the care of a mentor to guide and educate him during his absence in the Trojan Wars,[2] Formal mentoring programmes serve as a professional development strategy aimed at supporting young professionals in their careers. In academia, for instance, mentoring can help junior professors establish academic careers, balance personal and professional responsibilities, and secure scholarships.[3,4] In clinical practice, mentoring assists young professionals in shaping their careers, while also enhancing technical training and ultimately improving patient care.

Mentoring plays a crucial role in the development of the medical profession. It is a bidirectional process that benefits the mentor and the mentee. As a long-term relationship, its purpose is to foster trust, guidance, and mutual growth for both parties.[5] Effective mentoring results in better-trained professionals, contributes to well-being, improves patient care, and creates a more successful future for the mentee.

Given the global challenges posed by the varying realities of anaesthesiology, coupled with the benefits of mentoring for new anaesthesiologists and the potential to develop future leaders, the WFSA launched the Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Programme in 2024 (Figure 1). To ensure the success of this initiative and to encourage further mentoring programmes, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the mentoring process, the benefits to mentors and mentees, the challenges of implementing a global mentoring programme, and the insights gained from the first edition of the WFSA mentoring programme.

Mentoring Process

Mentoring is defined as a two-way relationship between a mentor and a mentee.[6] This relationship may be informal or formal. Informal mentoring occurs when a senior or more experienced colleague guides a less-experienced colleague.[7] In this model, there are no specific rules nor an established schedule. Informal mentoring usually develops through peer affinity and often fosters a deeper connection between the mentor and mentee. In contrast, formal mentoring follows a structured programme designed to facilitate this process. The pairing of mentor and mentee is usually arranged through a selection process, and the connection between them needs to be actively developed. In a formal mentoring programme, there is a predefined schedule in which the mentor assesses the mentee's skills and progress, with a clearly established start and end date.

Figure 1 – WFSA Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Program.

Mentoring typically involves four main phases: initiation, cultivation, engagement, and separation.[8] The initiation phase involves understanding the motivations for mentoring, clarifying expectations, and defining the roles of mentor and mentee. It is essential to establish the reasons that led both parties to engage in the mentoring process, as this helps set mutual expectations. The cultivation phase focuses on defining ground rules, setting boundaries, establishing goals, and determining success criteria. It also includes creating a meeting schedule. Since mentors are often senior professionals with time constraints, having a structured schedule is crucial. The mentee should clearly communicate any concerns or questions to the mentor. This phase requires active participation from both parties. The engagement phase is the most intensive, as learning and feedback take centre stage. It demands a high level of commitment from both sides. If one party becomes passive, the other may perceive a lack of interest, which could lead to discouragement and disengagement by the end of the process. The final phase is separation, which marks the conclusion of the mentoring relationship. At this stage, progress is acknowledged, and mentor and mentee reflect on the journey undertaken together.[9]

Benefits to Mentors and Mentees

According to Feldman et al.,[10] a mentor may take on different roles, such as a career mentor, an academic mentor, or a co-mentor. A career mentor is a senior professional who provides general career guidance and support, even if they do not share the same area of expertise as the mentee. An academic mentor works within the same field as the mentee, offering guidance in professional development, academic research, and networking. A co-mentor, similar to an academic mentor, provides specific guidance in a particular area of expertise. The role of a mentor is multifaceted, as they serve as an advisor, a professional with experience who is willing to share their knowledge. Mentors also act as supporters, offering emotional and moral encouragement, as well as tutors who provide constructive feedback on performance. Furthermore, mentors can be valuable sources of information and guidance in securing professional opportunities.

Being a mentor in a structured mentoring programme offers several benefits. It enhances leadership skills, communication techniques, teaching abilities, and the capacity to manage challenges effectively. Additionally, it allows mentors to build a broader network of influence by engaging with junior professionals. The mentoring process enables mentors to share their knowledge, experience, and expertise while also fostering the next generation of professionals and leaders.

For early-career anaesthesiologists, participating in a mentoring programme as a mentee provides valuable opportunities for professional guidance, skill development, and career advancement. Mentees gain access to specialised training, increased knowledge, and improved career performance. Additionally, they benefit from their mentor's professional network, expanding their own networking opportunities.

Challenges of the Mentoring Programme

There are numerous challenges to implementing a successful mentoring programme. One of the primary barriers is the limited number of mentors with the necessary skills for such a role, making it difficult for mentees to find an appropriate mentor.[11] Additionally, the availability of time for mentoring is frequently cited as a significant constraint.[12] Other obstacles to an effective mentoring programme include a misalignment of expectations between mentor and mentee, as well as a shortage of mentors in specialised areas.[13]

When considering a global mentoring programme, additional barriers emerge. Language presents a significant challenge, as there are more than 7,000 languages spoken worldwide, with only approximately 20% of the global population speaking English. Cultural differences, geographical distance, time zone discrepancies, and access to a stable Internet connection capable of supporting effective communication further complicate the implementation of an international mentoring initiative.

Despite these challenges, in 2024 the WFSA launched the Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Programme to connect mentors and mentees worldwide. This initiative aims to foster professional development through the exchange of knowledge and experiences, providing anaesthesiologists with opportunities to learn from colleagues across different regions and healthcare systems.

WFSA Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Programme

The Global Mentoring Programme connects anaesthesiologists from around the world, supporting their professional development, facilitating knowledge exchange, and fostering the creation of strong support networks. The suggestion of a WFSA mentorship programme came out of discussions between Dr. Wayne Morriss (WFSA Board member) and Dr Juliet Hull (UK anaesthesiologist, working in Malawi) in Kigali in December 2018. In early 2019, the WFSA Board approved the development of a proposal by a small working group chaired by Juliet Hull and including three Council members (Chris Bowden - Australia, Daniela Filipescu – Romania, Pedro Ibarra - Colombia). The group has prepared the initial documents of the programme. Although formally launched during the World Congress of Anaesthesiologists (WCA) in 2021, the Mentoring Programme was not implemented until 2024.

The first mentoring sessions were offered in English, French, and Spanish in 2024. The new Global Mentoring Programme, was successfully led by Professor Luiz Falcão (Brazil), Dr Juliet Hull (UK), Dr Carolina Haylock-Loor (Honduras), Professor Christina Lundgren (South Africa), and Dr Mehdi Trifa (Tunisia), with the support of the Membership Manager Maria Tortajada (Spain) from the WFSA Secretariat. The key stages of the WFSA mentoring process are outlined in Figure 2.

In its inaugural edition, the WFSA mentoring programme attracted 314 participants, comprising 145 mentors from 41 different countries (Figure 3) and 169 mentees from 50 different countries (Figure 4).

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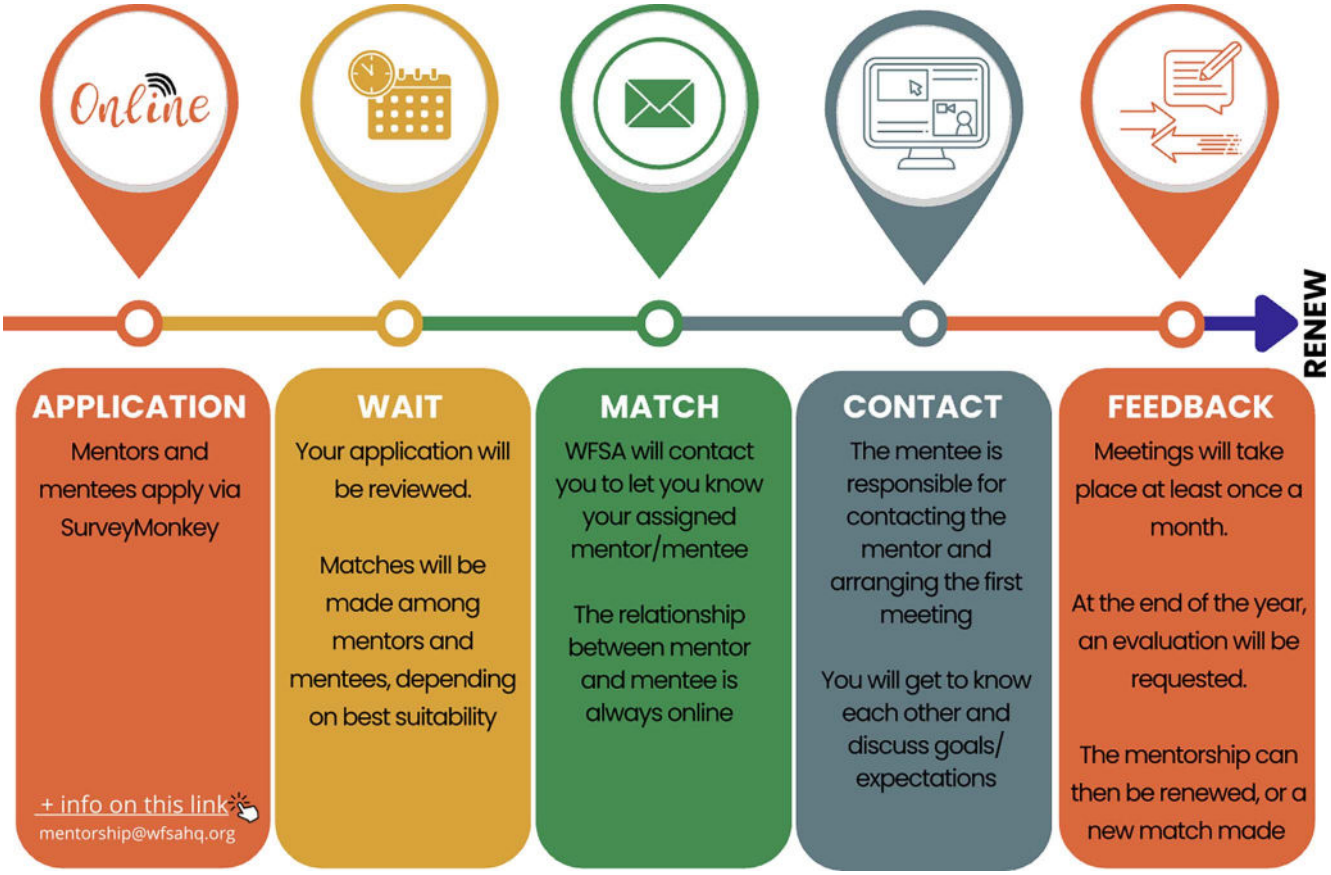

Figure 2 – Stages of the WFSA Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Programme.

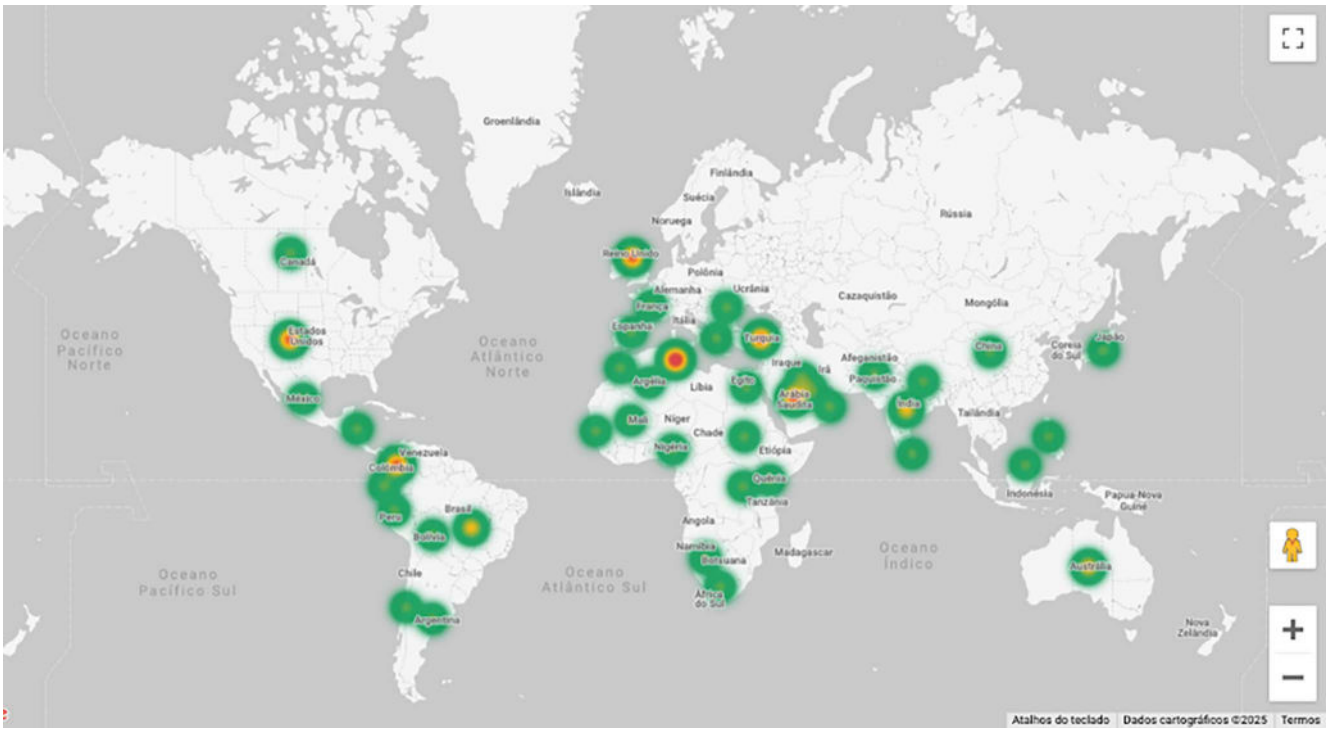

Figure 3 – Geographical distribution of mentors in the WFSA Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Programme. The colour represents the number of mentors, with red indicating a higher concentration than green.

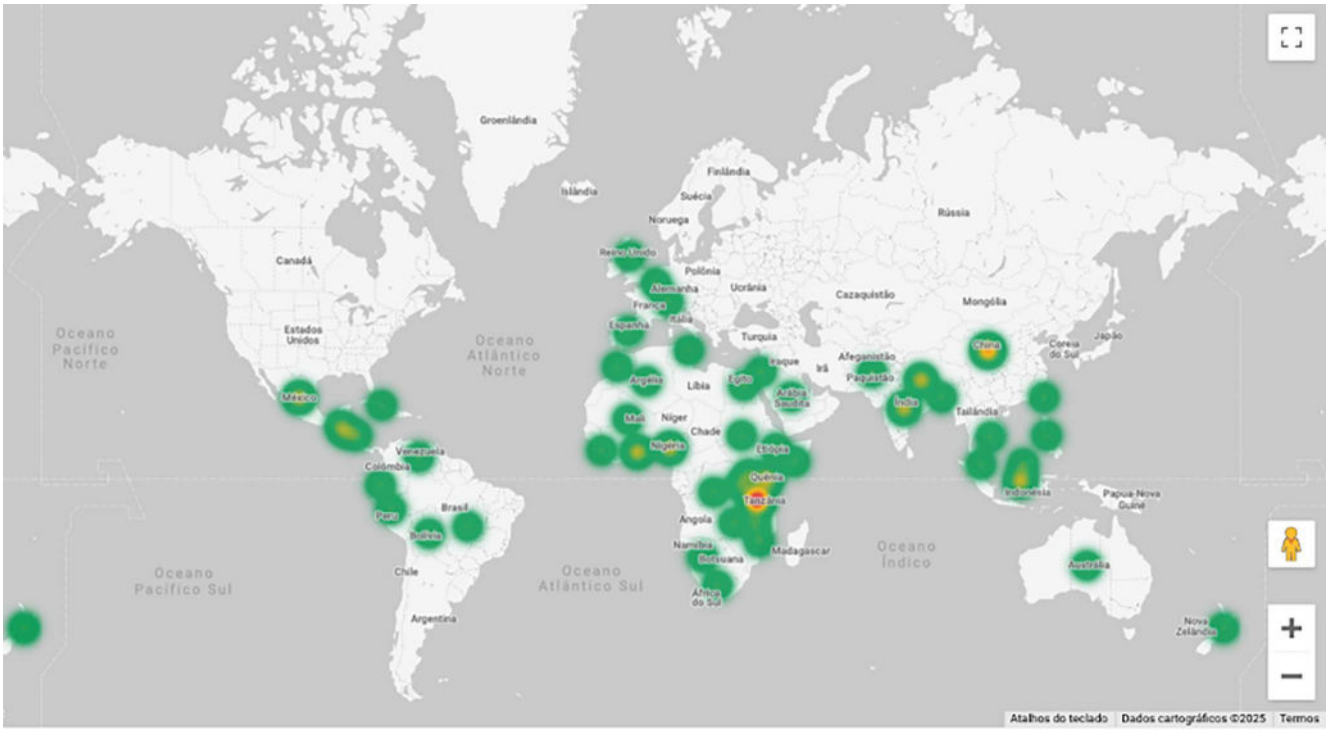

Figure 4 – Geographic distribution of WFSA Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Programme mentees. The colour represents the number of mentees, with red indicating a higher concentration than green.

Among the mentors, 82% of applications were for mentoring in English, 12.4% in Spanish, and 5.5% in French. Among the mentees, 81% applied for mentoring in English, 14% in Spanish, and 4.7% in French. These participants represent diverse geographical and professional backgrounds, contributing to a dynamic environment for mutual learning. In terms of geographical distribution, 34% of participants were from Asia, 33% from Africa, 18% from the Americas, 8% from Europe, 5% from the Middle East, and 2% from Oceania (Table 1).

The programme matched mentors and mentees based on shared interests, professional needs, and language preferences. The four primary areas of expertise among mentors were obstetric anaesthesia, paediatric anaesthesia, regional anaesthesia, and intensive care (Table 2). Of the mentors, 76% were suited for clinical mentoring, 13% for leadership mentoring, and 10% for professional development. Among the mentees, 40% sought mentoring in advanced knowledge and specialised topics, 38% in general knowledge and expertise, 10% in general support, and 9% in career development. Regular virtual meetings, goal-setting exercises, and structured feedback mechanisms were suggested to ensure the effectiveness of the mentoring relationships.

Early data indicate that participants report high satisfaction with the programme, highlighting increased confidence in clinical practice,

Table 1 – Geographical distribution of mentors and mentees of the WFSA global anaesthesia mentoring programme. Data presented in absolute numbers and percentages (%)

	Mentee	Mentor	Total
Africa	82 (49)	22 (15)	104 (33)
Americas	22 (13)	35 (24)	57 (18)
Asia	46 (27)	60 (41)	106 (34)
Europe	12 (7)	13 (9)	25 (8)
Oceania	4 (2)	2 (1)	6 (2)
Middle East	3 (2)	13 (9)	16 (5)
Grand total	169 (54)	145 (46)	314 (100)

Table 2 – Areas of expertise of the WFSA global anaesthesia mentoring programme mentors. Data presented in absolute numbers and percentages (%)

Obstetric Anaesthesia	21 (14)
Paediatric Anaesthesia	21 (14)
Regional Anaesthesia	21 (14)
Intensive & Critical Care Medicine	20 (14)
Safety & Quality of Practice	11 (8)
Pain Management	10 (7)
Perioperative & Ambulatory Anaesthesia	10 (7)
Neuroscience	8 (6)
Airway Management	7 (5)
Cardiac	5 (3)
Global Health	2 (1)
Others	9 (6)
Grand total	145

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improved leadership skills, and greater professional engagement. The virtual nature of the programme has facilitated mentoring connections across continents, strengthening the global community of anaesthesiologists. A full report of the Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Programme will be provided at the end of 2025.

The WFSA Global Anaesthesia Mentoring Programme has proven to be an innovative and highly relevant initiative for the development of anaesthesia professionals worldwide. By connecting mentors and mentees from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, the programme is fostering a rich environment for mutual learning, professional growth, and the strengthening of the global anaesthesia community.

Preliminary data suggest a positive impact on clinical training, leadership skills, and professional networking among participants, reinforcing the importance of structured mentoring initiatives in medicine. However, challenges such as language barriers, time zone differences, and the availability of mentors highlight the need for ongoing strategies to enhance and expand the programme.

The success of this inaugural edition underscores the potential of mentoring as an essential tool for the advancement of anaesthesiology on a global scale. The continued development and evolution of the programme will further consolidate its contribution to strengthening the specialty, promoting more equitable and high-quality training in regions with a lower density of professionals and developing leadership capabilities, in line with WFSA 2023–2025 strategic priorities (https://wfsahq.org/wp-content/uploads/WFSA-Strategy-2023-28_final.pdf). Effective mentorship plays also a critical role in addressing barriers to women's career advancement.[14]

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