

Motec at Ghana-UK/THET Health Links Workshop 21st March 2007

By Ray Ofori and P. Ofori-Atta

The Royal College of Physicians (RCP), and The Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET) have hosted a workshop on health links between U.K and Ghana at Regent Park, London on 21st March, 2007. Over 80 participants from U.K and Ghana attended including a four man delegation from the Ghana Ministry of Health and representatives from the International Organisation for Migration (I.O.M.) sub division Migration and Development (MIDA).

The workshop chairman Mr Olujumi Coker, Consultant General Surgeon, gave a brief and interesting introduction, pointing out that Tropical Health and Educational Trust's (THET) mission is to help improve the basic health services of the poorest countries, building long term capacity through training and support. It works to facilitate institutional Links globally between hospitals and training institutions in developing countries and their UK counterparts, and to pilot sustainable models of accessible health care through programmes in Ghana and other African countries. Several other contributors confirmed this idea during the day. He gave a brief overview of work which link has undertaken in northern Ghana.

Dr Edward Addai, Director of Policy, Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, from the Ghana Ministry of Health gave an interesting account of the way the health sector has been organised for the past 50 years post independence and the challenges that the nation faces in providing adequate health care for the people. He highlighted the major concerns:

- A tenth of children dying before the age of 5 years;
- Too many maternal deaths;
- Old communicable diseases; and
- Deaths through preventable diseases. He cited deaths and morbidity from road traffic accidents.

He reiterated that the future solution to the delivery of adequate health care in Ghana would involve championing the training and support of nurses and health/clinical officers, called medical assistants in Ghana who are most likely to stay in the country and to serve patients in the rural and remote areas(70%of the population).

Professor Eldryd Parry, founder of THET gave an inspirational lecture on his experience as an educator, physician, and curriculum developer of School of Medical Science in Kumasi, working in Africa. It was noted that he was the second Dean of the University of Science and Technology School of Medical Sciences (SMS) in Kumasi Ghana. He talked about his extensive work in Africa including Ibadan in Nigeria, his experiences and what motivated him to form the organisation. He encouraged participants to continue with the drive of commitment to help improve the quality of life and opportunities for the

general population in poor countries, with special concern for the most neglected. The ultimate aim, he said is to help them to live longer and healthier lives and play a full part in their local economy and society.

The afternoon section began with three short presentations. Stephen Booth and Linda Mages talked about THET's work with Bolgatanga Nurses Training College, in the North Eastern Region of Ghana. There is a link established between the college and University of the West of England which is aimed at developing, providing support motivation, and transfer of nursing skills to the students.

Dr Chris Oppong, Plymouth link coordinator presented their two working visits to the twin city of Sekondi-Takoradi at the west coast of Ghana in which several hundreds of hernia operations were performed each working visit with successful results and therefore many happy patients. Their main achievement of the health link has been the establishment of a hernia centre at Takoradi Hospital.

Dr Victor Doku, a psychiatrist and epidemiologist gave a brief analysis on the background to the brain drain of health professionals from Ghana. He shared his experience of the efforts he has made to locate psychiatrist of Ghanaian origin in the diasporas to help educate medical student training in Ghana and also about his research work at the Kintampo Health Research Centre.

The afternoon session saw participants break into four groups. Discussions centred on topics searching for improved effectiveness and sustainability of health links between health institutions in Ghana and the U.K. The main points drawn from the brainstorm session could be summarised as follows:

- Link is created with the primary aim of addressing the training and skills development needs of institutions overseas based on response to request from the host institution in Ghana. The association between the health links are of mutual benefit, providing direct health care to the Ghanaian patient, and transferring skills to the local work force. At individual level, there is personal inspiration, refreshment and perspective, which can add to professional development and growth, as well as benefiting the NHS when the U.K volunteers return.
- Links between individuals can accomplish some excellent work but too often they depend on the motivation of a few people or individual so that the work may well cease after a few years. The solution to this is a long-term institutional involvement and commitment from both sides of the Link.
- The overseas institution should define link so that they have institutional ownership. It is the need expressed which both partners would be working towards. It was suggested that starting a small group with a defined and attainable goal and making coherent plan to keep the project running year after year is a more likely way to achieving a sustainable link.

- Keep contact and deal with more than one person overseas. This way communication is less likely to break down and create misunderstanding. Be aware that significant cultural differences in the treatment of patients are likely to exist. Open minded, readiness and flexibility approach to adapt are amongst the most important things you can learn. Share ideas, success stories as well as failures so that others can learn from your experiences.
- Planning, monitoring and evaluation and follow-up are essential components of all links, and should be considered as tools to ensure sustainable development and progress and when assessing outcomes and planning for the future.
- Promote your link within the Trust and the wider community. In this way, it will encourage new people to become involved, and the potential support for fundraising.

In his closing remarks, Mr Olujumi Coker thanked the organisers and participants for their time and support. He remarked that THET hoped that the principles and models being developed will be applied more widely as part of a horizontal approach to strengthening health care systems for all. In doing so, the much spoken about brain drain that appears to sap the strength of basic health service would be transformed into brain gain.

Motec was represented by a team of six members at the meeting: Mr David Lewis, Mr Zoltan Takacs, Mrs Veronica Mac-Quaeshie, Mr Steve Townsend, Dr Ofori-Atta and Mr. Raymond Ofori (all sponsored by Motec's president). The team expressed their appreciation of their participation, considering the lessons that six month old Motec could learn from her older counterparts. The workshop has provided Motec the wider picture of its role in concert with other groups and drawn the association into useful association with other health links and International Organisations.

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