THE HEARING FUTURE OF NIGERIA

BY JASON GALSTER, DAVID OLALEYE, OLUSEGUN AKINYINKA, ROBERT MURPHY, AND SUMITRAJIT DHAR
Between January 26 and 29, 2014, leaders from nine Nigerian universities assembled at a MEPI-N workshop in Ijebu-Ode to discuss the current state of hearing health care in Nigeria.

Today’s sub-Saharan Africa carries 24 percent of the world’s disease burden, with only three percent of the world’s health-care workforce.

Ten years ago, in response to this and the specific burden related to AIDS in Africa, the U.S. government initiated the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Subsequently, the Medical Education Partnership Initiative (MEPI) was developed by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to fund institutions in sub-Saharan African countries that receive PEPFAR support and their partners to enhance and expand medical education. The goals of MEPI include increasing the number of new health-care workers by 140,000 workers, strengthening in-country medical education systems, and building clinical and research capacity in Africa as part of a retention strategy for faculty of medical schools and clinical professors.

With 12 participating countries and 33 universities, MEPI efforts have proven successful in the advancement of education among medical and research professions across central Africa. The largest of the participating countries is Nigeria, with a suborganization called MEPI-Nigeria, or MEPI-N. The prominent efforts of MEPI-N have focused on medical education at six universities across Nigeria, with the international support of Northwestern University and the Harvard Public School of Health.

Between January 26 and 29, 2014, leaders from nine Nigerian universities assembled at a MEPI-N workshop in Ijebu-Ode to discuss the current state of hearing health care in Nigeria. The workshop was funded by the MEPI-N grant from the NIH, Northwestern University, and Starkey Hearing Technologies. Our team (Professors Robert Murphy, MD, and Sumitrajit Dhar, PhD, from Northwestern University, and Jason Galster, PhD, from Starkey Hearing Technologies) learned about the health-care and education systems in Nigeria from the distinguished attendees and shared information about the current state of hearing health care in the United States and other countries around the world with the group.

After spending the first night in Lagos, we drove 110 km (~70 miles) northeast to the small town of Ijebu-Ode, where the workshop was held in a hotel and conference center. The first day of the workshop
The goals of MEPI include increasing the number of new health-care workers, strengthening in-country medical education systems, and building clinical and research capacity in Africa.

As with many of these presentations, a glimmer of hope was present among a sea of obstacles. In the case of newborn hearing screening, several hospitals have developed programs, only to be faced with referral rates between eight and 29 percent. To further complicate this challenge, 54 percent of births do not occur in the hospital. Finally, current practices were discussed in the treatment of hearing loss, using hearing aids and cochlear implants.

Using the background of current practices, the delegation from Northwestern University and Starkey Hearing Technologies led the discussion over the following two days describing various models of audiology education and practice. Global models of audiological training and their appropriateness to the Nigerian context were of great interest to the group. Discussion of the current state of the art in diagnosing and treating hearing and balance disorders were detailed in live and recorded presentations from leaders in the field.

The last day of the workshop was dedicated to scientific presentations. These included a presentation of primary research in the Dhar laboratory at Northwestern University related to otoacoustic emissions and their clinical applications. Discussion regarding a need to develop research infrastructure in Nigeria was a point of keen interest for the attendees.

Perhaps the highlight of the workshop was a two-and-a-half hour discussion on the second day. This open and collaborative discussion considered various aspects of starting a training program of international standards in Nigeria. Various models were proposed and their advantages and disadvantages discussed. A survey, collaboratively developed by the visiting delegation and workshop participants, was used to collect objective information about preferred ways forward for the immediate future. Everyone in attendance agreed that immediate needs included:

- The initiation of a sustainable training program that would also serve as a national resource center,
- Initiation of a long-term regionally appropriate research strategy,
The development of appropriate technologies for hearing health care.

Our drive back to the airport in Lagos took a detour through the city of Ibadan, home of the University of Ibadan, the premier institution for higher education in Nigeria. The University of Ibadan impressed us immensely with a sprawling campus, medical school, and large public hospital. We met with faculty and physicians at various levels of the professoriate and administration across the university. Just as we were with the attendees of our workshop, we came away humbled by the level of talent and drive in these individuals. To the point, every academic and university administrator we met had received advanced training at a premier university in the United States or Europe; several held multiple doctoral degree and were clearly accomplished in their fields of expertise. Glimpses of the MEPI-N program’s impact were evident on campus, including an e-resource center for accessing electronic journals.

We came away excited about these newly formed collaborations with dedicated and qualified professionals, determined to collaborate over the long term, and hopeful for an audiological future that is appropriate for the unique needs of Nigeria.

Jason Galster, PhD, is manager of clinical comparative research at Starkey Hearing Technologies; David Olaleye, PhD, is a professor of virology at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, and principal investigator with MEPI-N; Olusegun Akinyinka is a professor and provost at the College of Medicine, University of Ibadan, Nigeria; Robert Murphy, MD, is the John Philip Phair professor of infectious diseases and director, Center for Global Health at Northwestern University; and Sumitrajit Dhar, PhD, is professor of audiology and hearing science at the Roxelyn and Richard Pepper Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders at Northwestern University.

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