

Breaking the barrier of cultural differences to advance the course of global medical research through the ISP organized by TMDU

Kwadwo Kyereme Frempong

Culture is a powerful tool that shapes individuals right from the second they are born till the second they die. In every aspect of our life, what we have been taught, know or have experienced influences us a great deal. As we grow and journey through the path of life, we learn from things that come our way. Some things in life are very difficult to understand when only described or explained to us. That is why the saying goes that “experience is the best teacher” In my opinion, science has reached a level where the scientific community is moving from individual research to team research. In some cases it is not only limited to a local team but one that involves different institutions. Nowadays the institutions are very likely international in scope and there are advocacies to have more international institutions collaborating with each other to carry out research. It is only through these collaborations that a lot of findings could be unearthed to the research community for better understanding. I foresee a future where the “global village” as we say will be made even more relevant in scientific research than it is now: where individuals from different institutions in different countries will collaborate to do research through advanced technologies and internet resources.

This vision came to bear when I had the privilege to attend the International Summer Programme (ISP) in 2010 through the invitation of the Tokyo Medical and Dental University (TMDU) to meet students and young scientist from different parts of Africa and Asia for a conference. I termed it a time of “Breaking the barrier of cultural differences to advance the course of global medical research”. The first day we met it was very clear that we had all come from different backgrounds and our cultural differences made it obvious. It was difficult to ascertain how we were going to work together. Perhaps some of us distrusted each other or had no faith that we could work together. I myself was not confident that we could overcome our differences in the short time of ISP2010. Only after we were put in smaller groups for discussions, stayed at the same hotel, participated in

groups for career guidance and attended parties together did I realize our differences were gradually reducing. Subsequently, individuals from different cultural backgrounds realized the strengths in other people from different places or countries and the need to develop friendship and likeness for each other. This did not happen in a day but after a long time of chatting and laughing together, picture taking and holding of hands. I personally have evidence through the pictures I took. These discussions yielded interesting research questions centered on differences and similarities in disease transmission and incidences in our various countries. It was also after these times that I realized people could even admire and appreciate cultural differences and have eagerness to know more from each other. Cultural barriers gradually became less and less of an issue in our discussions and as a result, perceptions carved for people of different backgrounds were now a thing of the past. I came to understand that views and ideas with respect to culture have to change to accommodate and relate easily to the international community. I believe that if young scientists or students get experiences like these, the scientific community will find it easy to advance the course of medical research globally. I remember very well from the last section that it was obvious each person had been transformed compared to the day we came. This was evident through the hugging, exchange of e-mails, telephone numbers and Facebook contacts. I personally made friends and contacts I can collaborate with in the future as a research scientist. I believe if programmes of this nature are frequently organized and opened up to other countries, it will help young scientists and students globally to break away from the cultural differences which we naturally acquire due to lack of an international exposure. Through international exchange programmes such as ISP, prejudiced minds will be set at ease and this will help accelerate the advance the course of global medical research.