

EDITORIAL

MEDICAL LABORATORY PRACTICE IN GHANA

In this issue of Postgraduate Medical Journal of Ghana (PMJG) is an article which has been reproduced from "The Biomedical Scientist" No. 689 of November 2012. The title of the article is "Clinical Research in Ghana: accuracy and reliability of laboratory results". The writer carried out what was described in the article as an "exploratory study" and made several observations based on this study. Though the findings were obtained from a questionnaire to which only 2% of the target population of registered physicians in Ghana responded, 85% of this 2% expressed opinions which the author/researcher considered valid and pertinent. This editorial is not meant to find flaws with the methodology of this piece of research or its findings but to use its objective to critically look at what has gone wrong with medical laboratory practice in Ghana and to suggest a remedy.

Before Ghana attained independence from colonial rule in 1957, medical research in the then Gold Coast, both clinical and non-clinical, was essentially "British" in character (standards included) with what facilities were available at that time. The senior medical and paramedical staff involved in research were mostly British or British-trained eminent physicians, assisted by indigenous staff.

A medical research centre, the National Institute of Medical Research, headed by a Dr. Gilman, was established at Korle Bu in the early sixties but was closed down in 1966 after the military *coup d'état* which took place that year. Some of the researchers joined the fledgling medical school (now University of Ghana Medical School - UGMS) soon afterwards. In the late sixties the UGMS started a collaborative "Ghana-Japan research effort", at Korle Bu, which grew and morphed, in the late seventies, into the Noguchi Memorial Institute of Medical Research, now sited at Legon. Medical research has continued in the UGMS since its inception and excellent work has been published from this institution by well-trained physicians assisted by equally well-trained laboratory technologists and technicians. The medical establishments and institutions mentioned above, and a few others in other parts of the country, have continued to do excellent research work of high standard either alone or in collaboration with similar institutions in other parts of the world. The emphasis here is that these institutions employed highly trained staff, familiar with standards used in the UK or USA. The situation has changed dramatically in the last decade or so.

The rapid increase in the number of government-owned hospitals and other health facilities, together with

the even more dramatic increase in the number of privately owned hospitals and clinics, since independence, has led to the decline in the quality of work of health laboratories. Not enough health laboratory technologists, laboratory technicians and biomedical scientists have been trained to keep pace with the number of hospitals, clinics and health posts. The Ministry of Health has failed to establish the necessary regulatory bodies and Quality Control measures that will ensure quality work is being performed in all these places especially those in the private sector. The fact that private health laboratories can be established without reference to any health authority and can employ trained, poorly trained as well as untrained staff means that quality of work cannot be guaranteed and serious errors cannot be quickly established and corrected. Laboratory physicians are a rarity, even in large hospitals. It is not surprising therefore that the appropriate scrutiny is not given to laboratory results. The reports that emanate from these private health laboratories or even many government-owned hospitals are a constant source of embarrassment. The MOH has a lot of urgent work to do. This should include training of more staff such as Laboratory Physicians, Medical Laboratory Technologists, Laboratory Technicians and Biomedical Scientists. But first and foremost the regulatory bodies and laws must be in place to ensure that standards are met.

The West African College of Physicians and now also, the Ghana College of Physicians and Surgeons currently train Laboratory Physicians in the various branches of Laboratory Medicine. However, the numbers of Residents training in this specialty are woefully inadequate. Efforts must be made to recruit more trainees into the specialty to assist in upgrading medical laboratory services and by extension, quality medical care in Ghana.

*Bruce-Tagoe AA, FGCP
Faculty of Laboratory Medicine
GCPS.*