



University of Ghana's College of Health Sciences
• Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research
• School of Medicine and Dentistry



Report symposium 'Future of maternal health care in Ghana'
February 16th at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Accra, Ghana

'Future of maternal health research in Ghana looks bright' .. but needs strong governmental support and funding.

On February 16th, about 100 clinicians, researchers and policy makers active in the field of maternal health in Ghana, participated in the symposium 'Future of maternal health in Ghana'. The aim of the symposium was to bring both Ghanaian and international stakeholders together to exchange knowledge and map future priorities in research to improve care provided to women during pregnancy, delivery and postpartum.

The symposium was organized by Korle Bu Teaching Hospital (KBTH), University of Ghana's College of Health Sciences (Noguchi Medical Research Institute and the School of Medicine and Dentistry) and the University Medical Center Utrecht (UMC Utrecht) in the Netherlands.

Maternal health is a central theme in Sustainable Development Goals 3, with the target to reduce maternal mortality to <70 per 100.000 live births by 2030. Despite substantial progress in the reduction of maternal mortality during the Millennium Development Goals, Ghana's maternal mortality rate currently is >300 per 100.000 live births. Research and innovation can meaningfully contribute to the acceleration of improvements made in maternal health in past years.

The meeting was opened by **Dr. Nelson Damale**, consultant Obstetrics and Gynecology at the School of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Ghana/KBTH, who shared with the audience the words of Benjamin Franklin 'An investment in knowledge pays the best interest.' Rev. Prof. **Patrick Ayeh-Kumi**, provost of the University of Ghana's College of Health Sciences, provided reflection in the opening prayer. **Prof. Dr. Irene Agyepong**; public health physician, honorary professor at the Division of Health Systems and Policy at the University of Cape Town and Public Health faculty member at Ghana College of Physicians and Surgeons, and **Prof. Dr. Diederick E Grobbee**, professor of Clinical Epidemiology at the University Medical Center Utrecht/Utrecht University in the Netherlands, chaired the meeting.

Prof. Richard Adanu, consultant Obstetrics & Gynecology and Dean of the School of Public Health at the University of Ghana, provided in his keynote speech a reflection on the current status of maternal health research and future priorities. He stressed the importance of implementation research: find out what works in the context of Ghana and why or why not. In addition, this should go hand-in-hand with research capacity building to train the next generation(s) of maternal health researchers. To ensure Ghanaian researchers are well positioned to conduct relevant research to improve maternal health, he called upon the Ghanaian government to increase research funding. Ultimately, he wished for "a future where women in Ghana have no fear and anxiety, and their chance that they carry pregnancy safely to term is high".



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Dr. Ali Samba, head of the Obstetrics & Gynecology department at the School of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Ghana/KBTH, emphasized the critical role that teaching hospitals play in bringing together clinical services, education of health professionals and research in order to generate and implement the evidence to improve health care. He echoed the previous speaker's call for increases in budgets for research, including dedicated budget for research at the teaching hospitals. **Dr. Franklin Acheampong**, head of Research and Development at KBTH, supported this call and assured the audience of KBTH's commitment to strengthen its institutional capacity to conduct research, as illustrated by the establishment of a research office in 2016 and the office's current support for ongoing research in KBTH, including the OBGYN department. He also highlighted the need to build strong institutional systems capable of translation innovative ideas, including strong research ethics committees, sustainable research funding and a facilitation of internal and external collaboration.

Assoc. Prof. Kerstin Klipstein-Grobusch emphasized the advantages and pillars of international collaboration in maternal health research: capacity building, shared agenda setting and reciprocity of benefits. She commemorated the long-term collaboration between the UMC Utrecht and Ghanaian health researchers, which started with the honorary appointment of Prof. Dr. Irene Agyepong as the Prince Claus Chair in Development and Equity in 2008.

Mr. Ronald Strikker, Ambassador of the Netherlands to Ghana lauded the long term friendship between Ghana and the Netherlands. He related the current symposium to the overall priorities the Netherlands and Ghana share, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and gender and women's rights. The Dutch-led initiative #SheDecides to counter the detrimental consequences of the current US-policy regarding abortion illustrated the Dutch commitment to global women's health. Finally, he complimented Ghana as a leader in the regional and supported strengthening of sub-regional collaboration with for example Liberia and Sierra Leone or ECOWAS.

Dr. Roberta Lamptey, family physician, diabetologist and Deputy Direct of Medical Affairs at KBTH provided a clinical researcher's perspective. She emphasized the need to focus on care health outcomes in research in order for it to have a positive health impact. She also highlighted the unique opportunities elearning can provide to provide training and build research capacity. It important that clinicians are equipped with the skills to be able to conduct operational research: research, which will lead to improved service delivery and care. In this regard, the benefits of virtual learning platforms, to service delivery across the entire healthcare system of Ghana are immediately obvious. **Prof. Christabel Enweronu-Laryea**, consultant pediatrician at Department of Child Health, School of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Ghana/KBTH underlined the need for research in obstetrics to also focus on neonatal outcomes as many causes of neonatal morbidity and mortality in Ghana can be prevented by providing quality obstetric care. **Dr. Linda Vanotoo**, director of the Ghana Health Services in the Greater Accra Region, added her support for this continuum-of-care approach from maternal to newborn and child health.



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Three maternal health researchers provided state of the art overviews of their research. **Dr. Mercy Nuamah**, research coordinator at the Obstetrics & Gynecology department at the School of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Ghana/KBTH shared her research on the growing cesarean section epidemic and associated complications such as adhesions. **Dr. Mary Amoakoh-Coleman**, postdoctoral research fellow Noguchi Memorial Institute, presented her research that supports inter-facility communication around maternal referrals. **Dr Samuel Oppong**, consultant Obstetrics/Gynaecology at the School of Medicine and Dentistry, University of Ghana/KBTH demonstrated the potential to save mothers' and babies' lives through research on sickle cell disease and the implementation of a multidisciplinary care initiative.

During the symposium there was a lively engagement of the audience. A selection of key messages that should be considered for future maternal health research:

- Collaboration in research often does not include district hospitals and community health centers. Yet, this can be valuable, especially with implementation research.
 - How can we make research more inclusive of non-referral facilities, in all phases of research from design to dissemination?
- There is a competition of (human) resources between clinical services, education and research. To support research in health facilities, therefore, a crucial question is:
 - How can research be considered integral to the provision of health services?
- A number of topics often less at the forefront of research, but no less important were identified, e.g. mental health and wellbeing, the role of respectful maternity care provision to ensure good quality care, and collaborative research along the continuum of maternal, neonatal and child health care.
- The role of policy makers as key enablers for research was recognized, and it will be increasingly important to engage them and involve stakeholders in the political area and Ministry of Health.

The meeting concluded with the presentation of the **booklet 'Carry Care: impressions of maternal healthcare in Ghana'** to all participants. This booklet features the stories and people involved in maternal health care, maternal health research, women and their families. The booklet is available here:
<http://portal.juliuscentrum.nl/globalhealth/News/tabid/1175/ctl/NewsDetail/mid/3640/NewsId/442/language/en-US/Default.aspx>

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For questions: please contact Dr. Joyce Browne, J.L.Browne@umcutrecht.nl