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Significance of Team Work in the Medical Practice of 21st-Century Nigeria

by

Professor Wilson I. B. Onuigbo

MB, ChB, MD (Glas), BSc, PhD (Lond), DTM&H (Lpool), FICA, FIHEN, FSPUCA; FICS, FMCPth, FWACP, FRCP, FRCPht, IOM, OON

Medical Foundation & Clinic; 8 Nsukka Lane, Uwani, Enugu, Nigeria
e-mail: wilsonui@yahoo.com

Invited Guest Lecture delivered during the Health Week of the Faculty of Health Sciences and Technology, College of Medicine, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, on Friday, 9th March, 2007.
It was a great pleasure, indeed, to receive on Friday, 2nd March, 2007, an urgent letter from Professor N.I. Onyemelukwe, your Dean. I dare not say that she is the apple of my eye. However, I can vouch that her father taught me History at the famous Dennis Memorial Grammar School (DMGS), Onitsha. He was the one who carefully introduced her to me. In fact, she became my first research student and this was of 1976 vintage! So, how could I refuse her request to function today as a Resource Person/Guest Lecturer at this well omened occasion.

Occasion such as the present one requires not only 20th Century but also 21st Century ideas. Hence, in delving into Health Week matters, I will say more than a few things. Therefore, let me start with part of what I said during a recent Lecture. In 1977, I retired voluntarily from the Ministry of Health, Enugu, where I had headed the Eastern Regional Laboratory from 1963. Throughout, there was no quarrel between me, the pathologist, and the many technologists. I was truly in charge of their training up to the Intermediate Associateship level. Time after time, when the Civil War had just ended, I despatched meritorious memoranda to the Headquarters, e.g., Training of Technologists (15/4/1970) and Training of Laboratory Technicians (14/5/1970). By 10th May, 1970, I recommended one of them, Mr Richard Tagbo, for training in UK as follows:

He is very well known to me. He holds the Intermediate Certificate of the Institute of Medical Laboratory Technology. He is very keen on Haematology and Blood Transfusion, being, in fact, our resident technician for this purpose. I am sure that you will find him suitable in every respect.

Respect, I must say, is what I have always received from Medical Laboratory Technologists or, to use their new Baptism Name, Medical Laboratory Scientists! The point is that respect promotes team work which, in turn, promotes the development of human resources. The field of Pathology is not for rancour. It is not for calamity but for amity. It is not for shifting of goal posts (as in the Abacha days) but for their being fixed, thereby facilitating the scoring of good goals in health care. In this connection, note how Mr Nwakasi Nnamah, Chairman, Local Organising Committee, Inauguration of the Nnewi Chapter of the Association of Medical Laboratory Scientists of Nigeria, invited me on 3rd April, 1991, to deliver a Public Lecture on “Good laboratory practice and clinical pathology laboratories.” He was frank:

Sir, it is therefore our greatest pleasure and desire to invite you to be the Chief Discussant during this occasion. We sincerely believe that as a great scholar and renowned Chief Consultant Pathologist of international repute, our choice of you is very proper as you will do great justice to the subject thus enlightening the modern generation of medical doctors and other health professionals of the current concepts. We sincerely solicit your fatherly and kind assistance as to add more grace to the ceremony.

Ceremony was out while autonomy was in as regards grooming. Please consider my cordial relationship with the late Mr Geoffrey Ibeachum whose professional experience was in Medical Laboratory Technology/Science. He had fled from Ibadan to Enugu during the Nigerian Civil War. I took him in and encouraged him as regards the preparation of excellent microscope slides. He projected them unto screens. He did this when I was teaching students at the Enugu Campus. He did it, too, when I was going to Nnewi as a Visiting Professor. In time, he himself began to teach Histology and, finally, to teach Histopathology! Ultimately, he transferred to Abia State University, Uturu. By then, he had coauthored with me and others. Finally, I facilitated matters by pointing out that, even in the University of London, some pathology professors are not medical graduates. Accordingly, he was promoted a Professor! He even became the Coordinator, College Postgraduate Programmes. Indeed, he and the sagacious Professor Frank Akpuaka as well as my good self instituted the MSc/PhD in Surgical Pathology at Abia State University. We have so far twice harvested the PhD and MSc 7 times. Among the former is Dr O. O. Okechi, who is now a University Lecturer, while among the latter is Rev. Sr. Chioma Otunne whose
ongoing doctoral thesis is on fibroids in fellow nuns. More are enrolled in this promising programme.

Programme of action, be it noted, must necessarily have one impetus or another. In this connection, I recall that on the 11th day of July, 1974, I received a most important letter which ran thus:

Pursuant to Section 3(1) of the Institute of Medical Laboratory Technology Decree No. 56 of 1968, I, Alhaji Aminu Kano, Federal Commissioner for Health, Federal Ministry of Health, Lagos, Nigeria, hereby appoint you as a member of the Council of the Institute of Medical Laboratory Technology of Nigeria for a three year term with effect from the 20th of May, 1974.

1974 came and went. And, by 10th April, 1989, I received another interesting letter, this time from the Institute of Medical Laboratory Technology of Nigeria. Then, its President was a medical man, Dr. T. C. Chiori. Then, the correspondent was the Secretary/Registrar. His message concerned my becoming the Editorial Board Adviser as follows:

It is my pleasure to convey your appointment as one of the advisers on the Journal of Medical Laboratory Technology of the Institute of Medical Laboratory Technology of Nigeria. This journal, which had been in circulation for many years, was recently suspended owing to some operational difficulties.

It is my belief that if handed over to your kind guidance the newly reconstituted Editorial Board will function effectively.

Effectively, I replied in the following words:

Many thanks for your letter of 10th April received yesterday.

I am much honoured to have been invited to become an adviser to your Institute’s Journal. I gladly accept, hoping to be of some assistance in such a laudable undertaking.

Undertaking to work with that Institute reminds me of what was transpiring in the United Kingdom years ago:

In recent years a distinct change had occurred in the relationship between pathologists and their laboratory technicians of which most pathologists were largely ignorant or uninterested. The laboratory technicians with their well-established Institute of Medical Laboratory Technology were striving to improve their relative status in hospital laboratories in line with the much greater responsibilities which they were taking, particularly in chemical pathology and haematology. And they understood very well that one of the best ways of achieving this was to raise the standards of entry into the profession, make the qualifications for recognition more difficult to obtain and get away from an apprenticeship-type of training substituting a more academic, preferably whole-time, education as the normal mode of entry. Raising educational standard and improving the calibre of recruits to the technician ranks was something to which pathologist, in principle, could have no objection and indeed welcomed although, at the same time, like any other professional body, they were not anxious to cede anything of their own superior position. Furthermore pathologists were conscious of the fact that many of the technical jobs around a hospital laboratory were of a simple, repetitive character requiring neither great innate abilities nor a particularly academic education.

Education of the technologist was actually encouraged by the pathologists as follows:
In its early days the Institute of Medical Laboratory Technology had been much encouraged by
the Pathological Society with which it had developed close links. These links were gradually
loosened during the 1950s as the Institute became stronger and, after 1960, tactfully severed. At
the same time medical representation on its various committees was reduced as was the role of
pathologists as examiners for its membership examinations. By the time the College of
Pathologists came to be founded there was therefore not a conflict of interests between
pathologists and technicians, but rather a difference of opinion as how best to achieve the agreed
and desirable end of an efficient, up-to-date hospital laboratory service. Nor was either group
being entirely objective in the expression of its point of view – the whole discussion was shot
through with the matter of relative status; the technicians wanting to shake off the somewhat
avuncular relationship of the pathologists and the latter wanting to retain as much as possible of
their old superiority and influence.

Influence is quite a problem depending on the angle of view of the contenders. Thus, as
between the British College of Pathologists and that country's Institute of Medical Laboratory
Technology (IMLT), the relationship was as follows:

Suffice it to say that College's efforts were directed, one way and another, to maintaining the
influence of pathologists on technician training and qualifications but that, in general, it was
compelled gradually to give ground to the ever growing confidence of the IMLT and its
educationalist allies.

Allies are needed. In other words, team work is needed. Perhaps, we need to learn a lesson or
two from what is happening in 21st Century Britain! Prof. Ala'aldeen of Nottingham's
Scientist of the medical laboratory, hue concerns us a great deal. Concerning the field of medicine, there is the Pathological Society of Great Britain and Ireland. I became a Member in 1963. I was promoted Senior Member in 1991. What am I driving at? That Society celebrated its 100th birthday with the publication of "Understanding Disease" in 2006. My free copy of it was gladly received. What did it tell me in terms of possible emphasis in today’s lecture? It has chapter 18 entitled “Pathology 2026: The Future of Laboratory Medicine and Academic Pathology.” Under it, there is the subtitle: "EDUCATION OF MEDICAL LABORATORY SCIENTISTS AND BIOCHEMISTS IN LABORATORY MEDICINE IN 2026." Please note, the anticipated advance as it was stated: “In some disciplines such as cellular science (e.g., cytopathology) there will be an absolute need for specialized vocational MSc and PhD courses organised by laboratories, with the support of local health agencies to further encourage, support and attract scientists into this discipline.”

Discipline of medical laboratory science has not, here at Enugu waited till 2026! Already, I have with my professorial partner, far famed Frank Akpuaka, introduced both MSc and PhD under the unctuous umbrella of Abia State University. In this respect, I may mention that Miss T. M. S. Fopoussi, a Camerounian, already holds the MSc and, her home Government has encouraged her with a grant of N300,000.00 (three hundred thousand naira) towards her PhD work.

Work of a divine nature is what I call “Spiritual Wavelength.” It is a phrase well known to the happy family of Histopathology at the National Orthopaedic Hospital, Enugu, where I have my honorary official base. Consider what just happened. On Wednesday, 28th February, 2008, I was at Aba for an Accreditation Visitation. That day, there was some private opportunity to converse with Professor Esele, the President of Nigeria’s Association of Pathologists. As it happened, the question of MSc and PhD in Surgical Pathology cropped up. So did the ongoing acrimony between Medical Laboratory Scientists and Pathologists. Then, within 2 days, three students, namely, Ekperi, O; Essien, AW; and Zenebo, VC; came respectively from Abia State University Teaching Hospital, Aba; Calabar University Teaching Hospital, Calabar; and Port Harcourt University Teaching Hospital, Port Harcourt; to see me for their MSc course work at Enugu. At leisure, I chatted with them about the prevailing malevolence. Then, by 2 pm, I had to bid them goodbye, telling them that I could not invite them to share in my wife’s pounded yam and choice soup! On arriving at my home, the phone rang. It was an urgent call from the office which I had just left. It concerned the message in a letter. “Open it,” I ordered. “Read out the message.” Lo and behold! It concerned the letter from your Dean in pursuit of today’s fixture. Does this sequence of events that occurred within 3 days not reveal what I call spiritual wavelength?

Wavelength of this almost certainly divine type would be useless unless acted upon. Hence, let us pray that the contenders (or, is it the gladiators?) on both sides, namely, the pathologists and the laboratory scientists, would sheathe their swords and enthrone team work. In this connection, I like how a lawyer Vice-President at an American University viewed matters:

As medical technologists continue to assert their professional standing, their potential for increased litigation of legal difficulties surrounding their practice, administration, and education correspondingly continues to increase. To the extent that medical technologists are regarded as professionals, trained in special areas, endowed with significant responsibilities for diagnoses and tests, working for and with pathologists, an extensive review of the legal aspects surrounding their practice and their roles as educators and administrators is necessary and overdue.
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Overdue is earnestness as regards taking those special steps which will bring normalcy and armistice to our laboratories and to all other nooks of the health system. For instance, I happen to know that Dr Silva Ikerionwu was once a Medical Laboratory Technologist. Then, he resumed studying medicine. And, finally, with my help, he became a pathologist of note. Of course, I am yet to hear of a pathologist opting to become a medical laboratory scientist! Be that as it may, the academic traffic lanes are wide open. As for me and my eager supporting staff headed by Mrs Bessie Esimai, FIMLS, MSc, PhD, we will serve the patients with continuing, cohesive cooperation. Indeed, may the Good Lord promote both tranquility and responsibility in the medical practice of 21st Century Nigeria.

Nigeria, in conclusion, needs perforce to escape forthwith from the so-called “Nigerian factor” of Achebe origin. Let her health professionals embrace those factors of team work which should prevail among all members as follows:

i. Ways should be sought to increase job satisfaction.
ii. Positive steps should be taken to treat everyone with respect.
iii. Self-esteem should be satisfied.
iv. Avenues for upward mobility should be provided.
v. Doctors, nurses, laboratorians, physiotherapists, radiographers, administrators and others should be educated about less stressful ways of working together. All should be educated to be productive professionals not only now but also in the future. Yes! All efforts should redound to the glory of medical practice in 21st Century Nigeria.
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