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Edward OKEKE

By Jeff Mortimer

Why are so many physicians coming to the United States and Europe from developing countries? Edward Okeke, a doctoral candidate in Health Management and Policy in the University of Michigan School of Public Health, is one of them, and he remembers a heartbreaking incident that fueled his own disillusionment.

After completing his MD in his native Nigeria, he spent a year working as a house officer at a teaching hospital in Nnewi, and one night, a gas cylinder explosion started a fire in the women’s dormitory. Eight victims, some of them with major burns, were brought to the hospital’s emergency room.

“We didn’t have a burn unit,” he recalls. “They were there for a couple of days, then we had to make some attempt to move them to a larger regional teaching hospital that had a burn unit, which was two and a half hours away. Only one of them survived. If they had been here, in the U.S., a lot more of them would have made it. When you see people die who shouldn’t, just because the facilities weren’t there, you tell

yourself there has to be something better than this.”

Okeke reasoned that just practicing medicine was not going to create that something better. “I knew that I wanted to be involved with the bigger-picture issues but I didn’t know how. I was dissatisfied with sitting in a clinic day after day seeing patients but didn’t know to do anything else.”

“But I had an ‘aha’ moment one day,” he says. “It suddenly dawned on me that all the things I was interested in had something to do with health management and policy. From then on I knew what I had to do.” He had found his path, but it led away from home.

“I knew I needed to go back to school. It was clear to me that I would need a different set of skills,” he says, “but there weren’t any graduate programs in Nigeria that offered the sort of depth I wanted. I finally decided to come to the U.S. Michigan was ranked number one in Health Management and Policy, and so I applied to Michigan. Just like that. At the time it didn’t even occur to me I might not get accepted. Now I realize how conceited I was. I guess

you could say God was smiling on me.”

Okeke has already earned two master’s degrees, one in public health and another in applied economics, as well as an award from the Yossi Schiff Memorial Scholarship Fund, which was established to promote international understanding and offer an educational opportunity to foreign graduate students in need. “One of the things the award has done is that it allowed me to concentrate on my research,” he says.

The factors that account for the so-called medical brain drain, and its effects, are what his dissertation will be about. “People assume that it’s because the countries are poor,” he says, “like ‘it’s the economy, stupid,’ and while this seems intuitively plausible, empirical evidence for it is hard to come by.” Testing this hypothesis is therefore the focus of one of his dissertation papers. “Many people have advocated for increasing doctors’ salaries as a way to reduce brain drain,” he says, but it is by no means clear that raising doctors’ wages will reduce the number of doctors leaving. “In countries that are very poor, it is possible that the cost of migration itself may act as a barrier to migration, so that if doctors are paid more, one might get the perverse result of seeing the rate of migration increase because now more people can afford to go.”

The answers are complex and elusive, but Okeke’s goals are clear. After graduation, he plans to return to Nigeria, but his ultimate vision is even broader. “My dream job would be to work in international health policy at a place like the World Bank or the World Health Organization, where developing countries come for expert advice,” he says. “Nigeria, for example, is setting up a health insurance system. Who is going to run it? Do we have the resources? Do we have the human capital? That’s the sort of thing I’d like to help with.”

Okeke says one of the reasons he picked his dissertation topic was because “I’m on the phone a lot to Nigeria, and literally every time I call someone, I hear of another classmate who has left.”

So did he, but he’s going back. ■