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Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)

In Memoriam

Benjamin O. Osuntokun (1935–1995)

The Pioneer of Neuroepidemiology in Africa

Professor Benjamin Oluwakayode Osuntokun, MD, PhD, DSc, the pioneer of neuroepidemiology in Africa and the doyen of neurology in Nigeria, is no more. He died at the Evelyn Hospital, Cambridge, on Friday, September 22, 1995 at the age of 60 years after a brief illness.

The late Prof. Osuntokun qualified as a doctor in 1961 and subsequently did his postgraduate training in Medicine and Neurology in the United Kingdom. He was appointed a Consultant Physician/Neurologist at the University College Hospital, Ibadan, Nigeria in 1966 and was promoted to Professor of Medicine, University of Ibadan, Nigeria in 1970. He was Head of the Department of Medicine from 1972 to 1974 and Dean of the Faculty of Medicine from 1974 to 1978.

His interest in community-based studies of neurological disorders started with his research on nutritional neuropathy in Southwestern Nigeria. The chronic consumption of cassava which had a high content of cyano-genic glycosides led to myelopathy (predominantly dorsal column involvement), peripheral neuropathy, sensorineural deafness and optic atrophy. The syndrome was tagged 'Tropical Ataxic Neuropathy'. This research earned him a Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of

Science from the University of London. Thereafter, he described the pattern of neurological illnesses in Nigerians based on a detailed study of about 10,000 neurological cases seen over a 12-year period. His astute clinical observation led him, along with some colleagues, to the description of congenital asymbolia and auditory imperception, which is also referred to as Osuntokun's disease.

In international neuroepidemiology, he, along with the late Bruce S. Schoenberg and some colleagues, developed the World Health Organization (WHO) protocol for community-based studies of neurological disorders - 'green forms'. The protocols were used for studies in Copiah County, Mississippi, USA, Igbo-Ora in Nigeria, Quito in Ecuador, Beijin in People's Republic of China, Bombay, India, to mention only a few. The modified versions continue to be used in contemporary studies. The use of similar methodology at these sites facilitated cross-cultural comparisons and led to the generation of hypotheses on disease etiology. For instance, the environmental factor in Parkinsonism and the role of primary health care facilities in lowering the burden of epilepsy.

In his later years, he concentrated on dementia research with the main aim of

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studying Africans in diaspora and using the transnational cross-cultural approach to tease out the putative risk factors. He was the co-Principal Investigator for the Indianapolis-Ibadan studies of dementia of the elderly funded by the National Institute of Aging, NIH, USA. He inspired research into possible environmental factors in Alzheimer's disease and suggested psychosocial stimulation as being contributory to cognitive ability in the elderly.

The late Prof. Osuntokun was a prolific writer, a mentor, an erudite scholar, a great teacher-researcher and scientist. He authored/ co-authored over 300 publications. A well-read and widely travelled man, he was a shining example to his juniors and peers. He gave his best at all times and no problem was insurmountable. He carried out his research program with much zest and enthusiasm, and was always a source of inspiration to many of us who worked closely with him. He contributed immensely to the training of many young neurologists.

He received many awards in recognition of his research and academic achievements, and he served on several international bodies including being the Chairman of the Global Advisory Committee on Health Research for the World Health Organization (1987–1990). He was awarded the Nigerian National Merit Honour (1984) and he was an Officer of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (OFR).

Benjamin Osuntokun was a great man who left his footprints in the sands of neuroepi-demiological time. He will be missed by many of us who have to bear the burden of the challenge of his chequered career and his penchant for excellence. Neuroepidemiology in Africa has lost a rare gem.

May his soul rest in perfect peace.

Memorial Address from the Editors]

Among the many scholarly burdens borne with aplomb by Benjamin O. Osuntokun, MD, PhD, was that of regional editor for this journal which is devoted to neuroepidemiologic research. He always provided critical, well reasoned and insightful comments on articles submitted to him for review. I first became aware of his work many years ago when I had occasion to review literature dealing with myelopathy. I was fascinated then and remain impressed today with his work on a possible dietary cause (cassava) for some spinal cord degenerations due to neurotoxic substances therein. I was delighted when I met him years earlier and found him even more impressive in person. He was a large man both physically and in the magnanimous way he treated colleagues and students who forever surrounded him. He was powerful yet soft-spoken. My most recent encounter was but a few years ago in the corridors of the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health where he was working on one of his many projects. Then he was dealing with issues of dementia research in Africa. Little did I realize that his dynamic personality was destined to such a premature termination. While we have lost an esteemed colleague and this journal has lost an irreplaceable editor, the greatest loss is to the world of medical science to which his work in neuroepidemiology contributed so much. To Ben, I would have wished that he could have continued to enlighten us; to his students and colleagues let his work be a stimulus for additional neuroepidemiologic achievement particularly with African populations.