Doctor is patron, lesson to Ghana

Patients in the waiting room of the medical center in Emena, Ghana, call it the American clinic.

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

EMENA, Ghana — On a continent littered with grand projects that inevitably seem to give way to shoulder-high grass and dust, Emmanuel Tuffour set out to create something lasting.

The Cleveland physician left Ghana at age 20 and graduated from Case Western Reserve University’s School of Medicine in 1980. After interning at Mt. Sinai Medical Center, he opened a private practice in East Cleveland and shares another at Emery Green Medical Associates in Warrensville Heights.

In 1991, sensing the timing was right, Tuffour returned to Ghana long enough to build a 75-bed hospital in this village of a few thousand people in his native Ashanti region.

He named it the Aninwah Medical Center, after his late grandmother, who worked hard to see that her only grandson and his seven sisters were formally educated. All became professionals.

Suddenly, villagers who had always relied upon traditional healers, or taken long treks to rundown government health centers, were discovering the pleasures of being treated by diligent doctors working in a spotlessly clean environment.

“The reason I wanted to do this is, I am a very good example of a product of American philanthropy,” said Tuffour, 45, who attended CWRU on scholarships.

He began setting aside money 10 years ago for the clinic, which he envisions as a foothold rather than an isolated health care mecca.

“My biggest challenge now is to create an infrastructure,” he said from his East Cleveland office, to which he returned earlier this month after a brief visit to Emena.

He would like to see other health care providers set up services there, he said, and to have his clinic used as a base for studying diseases that — in a world shrunk by easy travel — may not remain confined to the developing world.

Why didn’t he return to work permanently in his native country?

Because he would not be able to do nearly as much living there as he can running the clinic from America, Tuffour said. Greater Cleveland hospitals have donated used equipment, and his fellow Rotarians in Ohio’s Rotary Club District 6630 help stock the pharmacy and handle shipping.

“Cleveland has been such a major part of this,” he said Tuffour, who is on staff at Mt. Sinai Medical Center and University Hospitals, and is a clinical instructor at CWRU.

“As a physician, I thought I could make an impact by making people healthy,” he said. “Constantly holding out a pan and asking for contributions is not effective.

“But the only way to get people to take responsibility for their health care is to make health care affordable.”

Tuffour, who lives in Shaker Heights with his wife and three children, did not have the luxury of simply standing back and admiring a feat that had already cost him half a million dollars, he said.

Soon, a clash of cultures pitted the naturalized American, who un-self-consciously refers to the West as “we,” against Ghana’s potent mixture of ancestral values and its legacy of past state socialism.

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Finally, struggling to sustain his clinic from his base in Cleveland, Tuffour said that each time he returned to Ghana he would find huge amounts of supplies missing.

“I have had to worry about everything, down to the nuts and bolts of the hospital, and I don’t mean its functioning,” he said. “I mean the pilfered hardware. Things were disappearing all over the place.”

With woes like these on the rise, last year Tuffour faced the grim prospect of having to close down his dream only three years after it opened. Then he struck on the idea of persuading his younger sister, Afranie Appiagyei, to return to Ghana from Toronto to serve as a full-time administrator.

Far from reining in her brother’s vision, Appiagyei, a former social worker, has expanded it radically. No longer content just to deliver health care, she and her brother are attempting a sort of cultural revolution without which, they feel, little lasting good can be done here.

The hardest part, they say, has been persuading the community that the hospital was not merely a rich man’s gift, but something they had to support. Likewise, they had to convince a hospital staff that once napped or moonlighted freely that it is real work that produces pay.

Moving to shore up the hospital’s finances, they have introduced $100-a-year health insurance policies for the poor, created a credit union that partly matches peasants’ contributions, and sold higher-cost coverage to Ghanaians living abroad who wish to take care of relatives back home.

“Here, if people have their own business, they work very hard, but if it is for someone else, forget it,” Appiagyei said. “Since I’ve arrived, if you don’t work, you don’t get paid, and in Ghana that is quite a revolutionary concept.”

“One thing I have learned from her is that to be an administrator there are no fixed hours and no days off,” said Eric Addae, 24, a professor recently recruited by Appiagyei to help run the place. “You have to make work your hobby and take pleasure from it. For that lesson I am grateful.”

That is also Tuffour’s view. He said he uses his vacation time at the clinic because “I enjoy the difference I can make so much that it’s better than a real vacation.”

These days, the buzz inspired by this ethically charged building has spread throughout the complex, with people seeking protection from cactus and flowers.

The hallways are cor being mopped. Nurses stand waiting for patients. And offices are always busy.

Perhaps the best measure of the hospital’s performance is the greater distances patients seem willing to travel. Here is the care here is best what we were finding where,” said Comfort Jemot, who had brought her mother from a stroke victim, recently away from home for the elderly.

For Tuffour, cases bring satisfaction enough to compensate for his troubles.

“One day, health care will be a profitable business,” he said, “but not likely in my life.”

“We have always had of turning away the poor handling the rich, but ever it was that caused, to be dreamt, that would be rible disappointment.”

Plain Dealer reporter Leslie contributed to this