

Medical self-reliance

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As a high school student, Edem Agamah spent his summers in Agbozume, a village of about 10,000 people in the southeastern part of Ghana, in West Africa.

He remembered it as a pretty town, but one that had serious health problems.

Last March, he returned to the town as Dr. Agamah, determined to help the people there do some-

thing to improve their lot. The trip, which lasted four weeks, reminded him of how much there is to do.

"There is no doctor nearer Agbozume than 15 miles away," he said, and no district nurses or health workers of any kind to help people with health measures that most Americans take for granted.

"Of every 1,000 children born there, 145 die before reaching their fifth birthday. The average woman there has eight to 10 children; half of



Agamah

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Dr. Edem Agamah
Founder of International Health and Development Network

them die before age 5."

The usual life expectancy for an adult is about 40, Agamah said.

But what people die of is even more tragic.

"They don't die of cancer or the other things we Westerners think of as life-threatening. They die of gastrointestinal diseases, diarrhea, all kinds of infections," he said.

And it's not that they don't care, he added: "People there are trapped in a cycle of ignorance, poverty and disease."

To break that cycle, the residents needed something more than a hand-out, according to Agamah. They needed tools to make changes themselves.

A native of Ghana, Agamah attended college and medical school there, then emigrated to the United States to complete his medical education.

After training in internal medicine at St. Francis Medical Center in Evanston, he did advanced schooling in treating cancers of the blood at the University of Chicago Medical Center. Two years ago, he set up shop in Springfield.

But despite his Western medical training and the trappings of a successful life (Agamah is now an American citizen), he never forgot the people he'd known as a boy in Agbozume.

In 1995, Agamah started planning for a medical mission to the village. But he wanted it to be something better than the usual such mission.

"Lots of times, doctors will fly into a place like Agbozume for two weeks, bring medicine and equipment, treat people or operate on them, then fly back to this country," Agamah said.

For the time the doctors are there, he said, people benefit. And the doctors feel good about themselves. But what happens to the people there when the doctors leave?

"It teaches them to be dependent on outside help to solve their problems," he said.

Agamah said he had something different in mind.

"I wanted to leave an organization of volunteers behind trained to help people improve the level of health in the village."

In March, he formed the International Health and Development Network, or IHDN. Later that month, he, his wife June and Vivienne Dawkins, a Cook County General Hospital nurse, set off for a month in Ghana.

Most of the trip was financed out of their own pockets, (about \$2,000

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each) Agamah said. With them they brought nearly \$30,000 worth of medical supplies, much of it donated by stateside drug companies.

As a native of Ghana and a former resident of Agbozume, Agamah knew that the only road to success lay through working with local leaders and churches in the village.

One of his first tasks was organizing a health council made up of 15 important people in the village, including the village chief. Through them, Agamah proposed an immunization program for the children.

"We immunized more than 50 kids during a two-day health fair in the village," Agamah said.

More importantly, he explained, he got the government district chief to propose a law mandating immunizations for all children before they

could begin school. The chief loved the idea.

The law was passed by the district legislature, and goes into effect in September.

During their stay in Agbozume, Agamah and his co-workers screened more than 500 people for high blood pressure. Eighteen percent were hypertensive. Some of them had had recent strokes because of dramatically high blood pressure, Agamah said.

Agamah remembered that pot holes in the road through Agbozume were often filled with the town's garbage.

"Kids walking to school would have to walk right over it," he said, noting the plague of flies such practices encouraged. "Flies land on the food, people eat it, the next thing they've got typhoid."

Agamah mobilized his volunteers to persuade the townspeople to use less-risky materials to plug holes in

the road.

The churches in Agbozume are very active and influential, Agamah said. Unfortunately, because of the high percentage of early deaths, much of the service the churches provide is funerals.

Worse, he said, because medical needs are so great and the resources to meet them so scarce, many churches have shifted into faith healing.

"I had to convince them that the skill and scientific knowledge of medicine also come from God," Agamah said.

Much of Agamah's work with local churches during the monthlong trip revolved around convincing them to put fewer resources into funerals and more into health-giving activities.

Many of his 15 volunteers were recruited through their churches.

Agamah said they'll spend their time lobbying parents to take their children for immunizations and urg-

ing pregnant women to go for prenatal care. In this way, he hopes to make Agbozume a center from which health information can flow into the countryside.

Over the coming year, Agamah hopes the volunteers will go out into surrounding localities and form smaller health groups there.

Agamah said the cost of flying to Ghana from Springfield alone makes it impossible to afford to go back this year. Instead, he'll focus his efforts on keeping his volunteers in Agbozume stocked with health supplies, and planning for expansion of IHDN.

Agamah said he wants to return to Agbozume in 1998. When he does, he hopes to bring more than just health expertise.

"I want to bring agricultural, educational and construction experts with me," he said.

"People in Agbozume are ignorant, but they're not indifferent. There's a tremendous willingness to work."