

Zambia Epilepsy Care Team Awarded Outreach Scholarship Community Partnership Award

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EAST LANSING, Mich. – Gretchen L. Birbeck, associate professor in the College of Osteopathic Medicine, and the Chikankata Epilepsy Care Team, represented by Chieftainess Mwenda of the Basanje Royal Establishment in Mazabuka, Zambia, were named co-recipients of the Outreach Scholarship Community Partnership Award during the annual MSU Awards Convocation on Tuesday, February 8, 2011.

Dr. Birbeck co-founded the epilepsy care team in 2001 in the rural Southern Province of Zambia, aiming to improve the lives of people with epilepsy and their families. The team provides clinical services, conducts research, and supports local capacity building and medical education in Zambia.



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“When we began, patients with epilepsy suffered social isolation, and were heavily stigmatized by their condition. Many cases of epilepsy went unrecognized and untreated. We continue to struggle to maintain the medicine stockpiles necessary to treat seizures and provide maintenance care,” said Birbeck.

One focus of the partnership is to provide health care for people with epilepsy, as close to the families as possible. The program team and researchers travel to diverse and hard-to-reach locations. They encounter difficult transportation situations, unsafe water supplies, erratic electricity systems, and interruptions to consistent communications. Their efforts have resulted in a reduction in expensive in-patient care at the area hospital and expanded the well-being of citizens because of practicing close-to-home health care treatment.

“There is an acute shortage of physicians in Zambia, and only two trained neurologists for a population of 11 million,” says Dr. Elwyn Chomba, professor in the Department of Paediatrics & Child Health at the University of Zambia.

“Dr. Birbeck developed a training manual with other local physicians, and they have now trained over 100 non-physician health workers. She and the team provide health care to the community, and the group works closely with policymakers and health workers to ensure the implementation of sustainable, cost-effective strategies to improve the lives of people with epilepsy.”

Birbeck is an associate professor of neurology and ophthalmology, and serves as director of MSU's International Neurological and Psychiatric Epidemiology Program. She has expertise in tropical diseases, including malaria and HIV/AIDS. She is regarded as an expert on the physical, social and psychological effects of epilepsy on African populations, and serves as a consultant for the World Health Organization.

MSU's Outreach Scholarship Community Partnership Award is conferred annually and provides University-wide recognition of highly engaged community-based research collaborations that positively impact both the community and the scholarship of MSU faculty work.

Learn more about current and past recipients of the [Outreach Scholarship Community Partnership Award](#).

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