

“Akwaaba!” “You are most welcome.” This is the common Ghanaian greeting and in this deeply faithful country no conversation starts or ends without hospitable blessings and well wishes. It is a true reflection of the kind Ghanaian people I encountered during my 3-week visit there last fall for my Vargas Award trip.

Komfo Anokye Teaching Hospital (KATH) in Kumasi is a 1000 bed hospital in the 2nd largest city in Ghana. There are 26 million people in Ghana, but recent estimates suggest a deficient number of some 20 Orthopaedic surgeons in the country. Rehabilitation programs are relatively new to Ghana Universities; they graduated the first Physical Therapy (PT) class of 13 in 2005 and recently opened an OT program.



Despite these massively unbalanced numbers, KATH is fortunate to have a staff of 20 PT/PTA's treating on the hospital wards and in their outpatient therapy building (approx. 2000 sq. ft). Still, the therapists are overwhelmed in both numbers and needs of their patients. Access to educational material and the Internet are limited and unreliable, but they are eager to learn and enthusiastic to improving their skills. To a Ghanaian, doing well for others is to do well for oneself.

My travel partners, mentors, friends on this journey were Heather Wood an OT / CHT from Florida and Peter Trafton a Trauma Surgeon from Rhode Island, who, in his role as an HVO Orthopaedic Program Director, has made multiple trips to KATH. Heather and I were fortunate to be the first hand therapist to travel to KATH and our objectives were slightly different than the typical Vargas Trip or HVO experience. We were charged with 2 objectives. First, assessing the Ghanaian hospital for its potential opportunities and obstacles as a HVO hand therapy project site. Second, fulfilling the purpose of the Vargas Award -- outreach and exchange of educational ideas.

Initially, I was worried about traveling without an AAHS surgeon. However, we were able to turn this to our advantage. We worked closely with the Ghanaian therapists seeing patients from Ghanaian surgeons and this gave us a genuine perspective of how things are managed at KATH. Surgeons and therapists could not have been more attentive and responsive to our roles and all were eager to collaborate.

Michael Kissiedu, our delightful PT liaison, guided us through our eventful days. Time was spent in Trauma rounds and the “Consulting Rooms” with either one of the 2 hand surgeons, Dr. Saani from Ortho and Dr. Owanso Danso from Plastics. We rounded the Wards and work in the PT building with the KATH therapists consulting on hand therapy cases - tendon lacerations from machete's, fractures and amputations from “Roadside accidents”, burns, nerve injuries including several fracture related radial nerve palsies, and yes, as it so happens, trigger finger and CTS!

Our greatest challenge on this trip was respectfully navigating our way through the Ghanaian culture, trying to understand the MD – therapist relationship, the rehab evaluation and treatment procedures, their baseline knowledge/skill level, and their needs and goals for developing an HVO / AAHS Hand Therapy training program.

Ultimately, we recommended KATH as excellent site for HVO. There are benefits of treatment space, a committed group of young therapists, receptive Orthopaedic and Plastic Surgeons, a population in need, housing, transportation, and it is in a safe, stable, English-speaking nation. We are proud to have helped HVO and KATH develop a contract for a Hand Therapy Program and the next Vargas Awardee will be going this fall. For Heather and myself, we will continue our relationship with KATH as HVO site co-coordinators.

"In the moment of need, the wise build bridges". – African Proverb, Accra Airport.

Thank you AAHS, Dr. Don LaLonde, HVO and KATH for paving the way so that I, and others can contribute to building this bridge.