



Dr. Oheneba Boachie-Adjei with a young patient

EDITORS' NOTE Dr. Oheneba Boachie-Adjei is a Professor of Orthopedic Surgery at Weill Cornell Medical College and Chief of the Scoliosis Service at the Hospital for Special Surgery (HSS). He is an Associate Attending Orthopedic Surgeon at both HSS and New York-Presbyterian Hospital. As Chief of the Scoliosis Service at HSS, he has a special expertise in the treatment of scoliosis, kyphosis, and spine reconstruction in both adult and pediatric patients. Dr. Boachie-Adjei was born in Ghana, emigrated to the U.S. in 1972, and completed undergraduate studies at Brooklyn College, where he received a Bachelor of Science (*summa cum laude*) in 1976. He received his Doctor of Medicine Degree from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1980. As the Founder and President of FOCOS (Foundation of Orthopedics and Complex Spine), he has helped provide orthopedic medical care to underserved populations in West Africa and other third world nations.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF FOCOS (www.orthofocus.org) is a nonprofit organization, established in 1998 by Dr. Oheneba Boachie-Adjei in the United States and Ghana, West Africa. FOCOS' vision is to develop a sustainable infrastructure and network through which volunteers and donors can efficiently and consistently carry out the mission. In particular, FOCOS seeks to enhance access to optimal surgical and nonsurgical care for patients with disabling musculoskeletal disorders including complex spine deformities and pediatric orthopedic problems in underserved regions. In 2012, the FOCOS Orthopedic Hospital opened its doors in Accra, Ghana to offer optimum quality care and services to patients in need. Since inception, FOCOS has performed more than 1,000 complex spine and joint surgeries and has treated over 27,000 patients.

What led you to found FOCOS?

Early on, I was set on becoming a physician. So in high school, when everybody was applying to universities in Ghana, I decided to go to the U.S. to get the best training.

I set myself up for a career that was going to make a difference in people's lives, knowing that

Doing the Impossible

An Interview with Dr. Oheneba Boachie-Adjei, Founder and President, FOCOS (Foundation of Orthopedics and Complex Spine)

we had a lot of neglected deformities in Ghana that went unattended.

Having reached the point where I knew I could make a difference, I founded FOCOS, which is a vehicle to work with the local medical personnel in Ghana so we can together bring this expertise to the country.

In starting FOCOS from scratch, how did you go about organizing it?

I realized that nonprofit was the way to go, by putting up my own money and asking for help from my friends, corporate partners I have dealt with, and the industry and medical device companies.

Also, working with the Ghanaian government would allow us to operate at the government hospital initially, even though the goal always was to establish a freestanding medical facility that would be sustainable into the future.

After 10 years, with the organization as a nonprofit 501(c)(3) and the contributions from benefactors, philanthropists, and friends, we had the money to build a hospital. The equipment – which costs about \$5 million – has mostly been donated by companies I have worked with.

Did the Ghanaian government lend support early on?

When I approached them about helping us with the seed money for the hospital, I also informed them that when I asked others for help, they would ask me what the government was doing; so it would be important for them to show good faith in order for me to convince others to help.

They gave us the initial grant of \$1.5 million. With that, we acquired the land and then raised the initial \$3 million to start construction.

Once it was built, we were able to have people come onboard and help out.

What type of surgeries do you do there?

We started with spinal deformities, because I wanted to start with an area I had expertise in and could control.

We then took on adult reconstruction and pediatric orthopedics.

About 400 million people live in sub-Saharan Africa, but you won't find more than 300 orthopedic surgeons there. Ghana has 26 million people and there are about 15 orthopedic surgeons – and there are no spine deformity surgeons.

So the cases are the worst of the worst. They come from all over West Africa and as far as East Africa.

The goal is to help the sub-Sahara region but with Ghana as the base, because what we're doing is mostly elective surgeries, and for this, people are able

to travel. We haven't gotten into trauma yet, as we are trying to work with what we can control including general spine, and adult hip and knee replacement.

Would you talk about the talent that you have brought in?

We have worked with local surgeons but there aren't many of them. Right now, there are four orthopedic surgeons, but none are full time. We have six anesthesiologists and they have been actively involved and have helped a lot.

Then we have residents and medical students. We have tried to assimilate them and have them as part of the team when we are there with the volunteers. Having worked with us, they have become very interested, so I have about four neurosurgeons and orthopedic surgeons who want to pursue a spinal fellowship and a joint reconstruction fellowship.

We have brought one of the Ghanaian orthopedic surgeons to the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York to do a clinical fellowship in adult reconstruction. Hopefully he will go back to establish the joint reconstruction program at the hospital.

We also plan to build the FOCOS Institute, which will be an academic training and career development center, so we can bring in local talent and train them not only in Ghana but also throughout West Africa.

What interest have you had from the corporate world?

We have been helped tremendously by most of the major orthopedic device companies.

We have also been fortunate to have the foundations support us by sponsoring patients, like Africa Surgery sponsoring the Sierra Leone patients and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee sponsoring the Ethiopian patients.

Bloomberg philanthropies generously provided us with a major grant to help with the acquisition of critical equipment we needed when we opened the hospital. Our galas have also been quite successful.

You knew early on that you wanted to make a difference. How did that come about?

When I was six, I got very sick and almost didn't make it. A pediatrician where I lived in Ghana had just set up shop and took me on as a patient for two years, after which time, I became well. But he left an impression on me. If I wanted to be like anyone in the future, I wanted to be like him. I also knew I wanted to help because the need was so great.

My message to the youth is like what St. Francis of Assisi said: Start by doing what is necessary, then what is possible, and suddenly you are doing the impossible. ●