

Liberia's Health Sector Gets a Boost; Japanese Doctor Promises Dialysis Center, Emergency Department, Incubators and More

By J. Wesley Washington

Emmanuel Togba, a Liberian resident in Lyndhurst, New Jersey, spent a lot of time crisscrossing and doing business across the United States. Then, five years ago, the travelling businessman came to a grinding halt. Scheduled for a knee surgery, he got an "emergency" cancellation call from the hospital just 24 hours before the operation. When he innocently asked, "Is the doctor okay?" Togba was mystified by the answer: "The doctor is okay, *but you are not.*"

Routine blood work showed there was something seriously wrong with Togba's kidneys, and he was urged to see a kidney specialist immediately. "I was quite confused," recalls Togba, now 54. "I thought I was in excellent health." His friends joked that he had been spending too much time travelling and securing business deals when he should have been spending time with doctors checking out his health. With a combination of support from his wife and children, excellent medical care and lifestyle changes, Togba has managed to stave off kidney failure since 2007.

Others, especially residents in Liberia, are not as fortunate in having their kidney problems diagnosed until it's too late to reverse the situation. Most hospitals in the country lack specialized equipment to diagnose and treat illnesses one might have without even knowing it.

On the other side of the world, in faraway Asia, is a Japanese philanthropist and humanitarian, Dr. Torao Tokuda. He made a vow to become a doctor when, at the age of eight years old, at midnight, he had gone begging the local doctor to visit his house where his ailing 10-year-old brother was fighting for life. The doctor refused, and instead told the boy to bring his brother to the hospital the next morning. Just before sunrise, the next morning, the brother died, and young Torao vowed to become a doctor. Today he is the Founder and President of a Japanese health sector giant, Tokushukai Medical Corporation, the largest private sector medical service provider in the world.

Sadly, ten years ago, Dr. Tokuda was struck by an illness that has left him paralyzed from the neck down. What is amazing is that he now corresponds with his eyes through his Japanese alphabets and his aides. He continues to run the Tokushukai Medical Corporation and to provide humanitarian assistance to people the world over.

Born in 1938, Dr. Tokuda graduated from Osaka University as a Surgeon in 1965. He opened the Tokuda Hospital in Osaka, in 1972, and over the years this effort has grown into the Tokushukai Medical Corporation which, despite his disability, he still chairs.

Tokushukai has grown to become the largest privately owned medical group in Japan. Under Dr. Tokuda's leadership, Tokushukai has built 63 general hospitals, 59 specialized medical centers,

21 visiting nurse stations, 20 senior citizen health facilities, and 7 social welfare facilities, among other facilities around the world.

In Africa, Tokushukai, in collaboration with the African Bank for Development, has commenced the construction of hospitals in five African countries – Mozambique, Djibouti, Zambia, Uganda and Rwanda – and established Dialysis Centers in the same five countries, as well as in Guinea and Cameroon.

Considering the enormous medical needs of Liberia, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf took time, during her recent visit to Tokyo, Japan, to meet with Dr. Tokuda and discussed with him her country's health needs.

Elated at her visit to the Shonan Kamakura General Hospital where he resides, Dr. Tokuda expressed his delight at receiving the Liberian leader and delegation, and especially at meeting, in person, Africa's first elected female President, a very famous world figure. He readily pledged his institution's assistance in reducing health problems in Liberia, and asked President Sirleaf to identify the country's immediate health sector priority needs.

Responding, President Sirleaf said she was glad to visit with Dr. Tokuda, and thanked him for what he has done and continues to do for Africa and humanity. "More importantly, to see him and what he brings with the difficulties he's going through, to rise above it, and to be able to have the kind of confidence and to be able to continue to work for mankind is just truly remarkable. We will take the experience from this," she said.

Dr. Wvannie Mae Scott McDonald, the Administrator of the John F. Kennedy Medical Center highlighted some of the country's most pressing health sector needs, especially the largest referral hospital which she heads.

This discussion was followed by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to improve healthcare in Liberia as part of Dr. Tokuda's international humanitarian efforts. Signing on behalf of the Government of Liberia, through the Ministry of Health & Social Welfare, was Dr. Scott-McDonald. Signing on behalf of the Tokushukai Medical Group was its Vice Chairman, Dr. Suzuki.

As an indication of its commitment to assist the Liberian Government improve healthcare, the Tokushukai Medical Group's pledged to establish a Dialysis Center at the JFK Medical Center, with state-of-the-art dialysis equipment. In addition, they will train one doctor, two nurses, and a bio-medical engineer to handle the equipment as the first phase of the assistance package. The Group has also committed to set up an Emergency Department, with a state-of-the-art Cardiac Center, and also to train health personnel in this area. The Group favorably considered an appeal from Dr. Scott-McDonald for a number of incubators for new births likely to be born prematurely.

All of this support will come at absolutely no cost to the Liberian Government; including the health personnel to be trained in Japan at the expense of the Corporation.

The MOU states that the Parties are to jointly engage in projects that will: advance the healthcare of the people of Liberia through the improvement of healthcare practices, facilities and/or equipment; adhere to international standards of conduct and the humanitarian principles of the Tokushukai Medical Group that says, “all living beings are created equal and deserve access to the same high quality healthcare”; and to continue discussions concerning the projects, in order to enter into definitive agreements which will set forth the Terms and Conditions under which each Party will contribute to their completion.

Dr. Tokuda promised his institution’s full cooperation in adhering to the MOU, saying that he wanted to produce results with Liberia very quickly. He designated the Board’s Vice Chairman, Dr. Suzuki, to work with Liberia’s Ambassador to Japan, Ms. Youngor Telewoda, to expedite the process.

A team from Tokushukai Medical Group will shortly visit Liberia for an initial assessment of other healthcare needs of the Liberian Government, as a starting phase.

President Sirleaf said that, before the end of her tenure, she would pressure Vice Chairman Suzuki and Ambassador Telewoda to ensure that a Tokuda Hospital is also built in Liberia. This big dream could become a reality if the momentum is maintained, as all signs are positive.

Dr. Tokuda, though confined to a wheelchair, personally led the Liberian leader and delegation on a guided tour of the hospital. As she departed, President Sirleaf said to Dr. Tokuda: “To leave your suite and to come with us on this tour is so exceptional. It touches all of our hearts.”

What better gift to receive on such a visit? On all foreign visits, including this one to Japan, President Sirleaf advocates on behalf of the Liberian people, and reaps the benefits for her people.