

ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

By

BRIAN M. GREENWOOD

LAUREATE FOR MEDICAL RESEARCH

HIDEYO NOGUCHI AFRICA PRIZE

Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress,  
HM Mswati III of the Kingdom of Swaziland,  
Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda,  
Leaders of the African countries and international organisations,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The substance of a talk on an occasion such as this must be mainly one of thank yous to those who have made it possible but before going on to these I want to say a few words about what this occasion means for me. Forty-three years ago, as a young man, I set off on my first visit to Africa to take up an appointment at University College Hospital, Ibadan in Western Nigeria, which I had seen advertised in the medical journal, The Lancet. At that time, this was considered rather a strange thing to do. I had up to that point done well in my medical career in England and some of my seniors in the UK considered that going to work in Africa was bizarre, almost a form of professional suicide for a young physician. This evening is the occasion on which I have finally proved them wrong.

When I arrived in Nigeria, I knew no one but I was immediately made to feel at home and could not wait to get back after my first leave in the UK. It is this warmth,

whether from professional colleagues or from the people of even the poorest villages, that has led me to spend most of my career living in Africa and, since moving back to the UK, to return as frequently as I can. I hope that during my career I have been able to pay back some of the support and kindness that I have received from the African people with whom I have worked.

Turning now to my thank yous. Firstly, I thank those who developed the concept of the Noguchi prize, especially Prime Minister Koizumi, the Japanese Government for bringing this concept to fruition and for the many people who have worked on the mechanics of awarding the prize, such as Prof Kurokawa. I am of course especially grateful to the prize committee for having decided to award the first prizes to Dr. Were and to me. The concept underlying the Noguchi prize is an extremely important one as it establishes the point that what is sometimes considered as rather soft 'applied' or 'field' research is as intellectually rigorous and demanding as the high technology laboratory research that, in the past, has usually attracted the international prizes. The establishment of the Noguchi prize will help to redress this balance and the Japanese Government is to be commended on taking this initiative.

Secondly, I thank their Majesties and the many distinguished guests who have come this evening to make this a very special occasion which my wife and I will never forget.

When I started out on a career in research it was possible to be a lone researcher and I did nearly all the work for my MD thesis on autoimmune disease in Nigeria, including the field work, the laboratory work and the statistical analysis by myself.

This would be almost impossible today when research has become much more professional requiring a team effort. I have been fortunate to have had so many outstanding scientific colleagues from Africa and elsewhere in the teams with which I have worked and this award is recognition of their work as well as mine. It is invidious to pick out names but there are three people whom I want to specifically acknowledge. The first is Eldryd Parry who was my Professor at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. He taught me that to understand an infectious disease it is necessary to look beyond the patient's bedside to the background from which the patient came. My second thank you is to Hilton Whittle, who was my colleague in Zaria and who moved with me to The Gambia where we worked together again for a further 15 years. Finally, I thank Geoff Taregett, who is here with us tonight representing the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Geoff has been a colleague for over 30 years and has worked closely with me during the past 8 years co-ordinating the successful Gates Malaria Partnership.

Scientists cannot work without funders and I have been fortunate to have received support from several donors during my career, some of whom must have thought that they were taking a risk in supporting a rather eccentric scientist working in Africa. I hope that today I have been able to repay some of their trust. I must mention specially the UK MRC, which supported much of my work in The Gambia on which this award has been based, and also the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation from which I have received generous support during the past few and whose creation has transformed research in areas such as malaria.

Finally, there is one very special person whom I want to thank. My wife Alice and I met 43 years ago in Ibadan Nigeria, where she was working as a paediatrician, when I went to the flat above mine to complain about the plant that was hanging off her balcony onto my veranda. This was a fortuitous meeting. We have now been married for 40 years and have been through some good but also some difficult and even dangerous times together but she has never complained and has always been totally supportive of my wish to work in Africa. This prize is hers as much as mine.