Rebirth of Ghana’s national iodine laboratory

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Ghana’s first iodine laboratory was founded in 1994 at the Department of Nutrition and Food Science, University of Ghana in Legon. It was funded by the Canadian International Development Research Center (IDRC) as part of a contract to conduct a nationwide baseline IDD survey in 1991–1994. Equipped to carry out analyses of urine iodine and serum TSH, among others, the lab quickly established itself as the regional service and research center for IDD and the University’s training center in iodine analytical methods. Over the years, its services have supported the IDD programs of Ghana, Benin, and Togo.

Run by Professor Ebenezer Asibey-Berko from two small rooms next door to the Department of Nutrition for almost 20 years, the laboratory eventually outgrew its space. By 2012 it was time to move into bigger premises. In early 2012, a suitable space was secured at the University’s Noguchi Memorial Institute for Medical Research, and plans were drawn up to reactivate the lab, by upgrading equipment, restocking reagents, and providing essential training to ensure a high standard of performance under the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) EQUIP program for iodine laboratories.

With the assistance of Dr. John Egbuta (then ICCIDD Regional Coordinator for West Africa), the lab secured a grant for USD 13,000 from IGN that was sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to go ahead with the plan. After a successful relocation, a consultant from Tanzania’s iodine laboratory visited the new lab in 2014 to witness its operations and work with the staff.

Professor Asibey-Berko retired from the University in 2013. His successor, Prof. Matilda Asiedu, has a strong background in nutrition, biochemistry, and public health and received her graduate training in Norway and the United States. She is the current Head of the Department of Nutrition and Food Science at the University of Ghana, and she is the recipient of the top African female scientist award in December 2012.

The new laboratory has established relationships with GAIN and UNICEF, and it has been contracted to perform urine and salt analyses in Ghana, Niger, and Sierra Leone. In November last year, Prof. Asibey-Berko and Prof. Asiedu both helped with the training of GAIN field staff in preparation for data collection in an upcoming national survey. The IGN’s role in the upgrade project has been invaluable. With the new equipment and in the new premises, the laboratory is now better positioned to assume the role of a regional iodine lab for West Africa.