
International health workers spend year at VCU

As a Humphrey Fellow, a psychiatric nurse from West Africa is learning how the U.S. treats substance abuse and will apply that knowledge back home



WRITTEN BY
Vanessa Gleiser

TAGS
addiction, Ghana, Humphrey Fellows

PUBLISHED
Dec. 5, 2016

Samuel Hanu, a 39-year-old psychiatric nurse from Ghana, ordinarily spends his days working with patients in his country's capital, Accra, in West Africa. But he is spending this year at Virginia Commonwealth University, researching how the United States treats substance abuse and mental illness. He hopes to bring his findings back to his homeland.

Hanu is a participant in the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program, which brings professionals from all over the world to the U.S. for a year of

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For 2016-17, there are 168 Humphrey Fellows in the U.S.

study.

“What I’m hoping to take from this program is evidenced-based addiction education, management and prevention,” Hanu said. “I want to take back home all that I will learn in the U.S. I admit that I need to make these interventions culturally appropriate so they can have the greatest impact.”

President Jimmy Carter created the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellowship Program in 1978 as a way for the U.S. to share “democracy, social justice and a desire to assist the developing nations of the world.”

Alison Breland, an associate coordinator at VCU for the program, is in charge of academic advising for the fellows.

“We let them take a couple of courses while they are here even though fellows do not earn a degree while in the program. I help them find the classes that fit best and introduce them to professors,” she said. “We also arrange for several workshops on leadership topics that focus on fellows’ leadership styles, how to manage conflicts and how to work in teams, for example.”

Since 1978, more than 4,600 fellows from 157 countries have participated in the program. More than 40 universities have hosted fellows for their year of study.

“Since 2006, VCU has hosted seven to 12 Humphrey Fellows annually, including 12 this year,” Breland said. She said the fellows at VCU are all in the public health field.

Applicants for the Humphrey Fellows Program are accepted first by the U.S. State Department and then by VCU if the university fits with



Samuel Hanu making a presentation about Ghana to colleagues and faculty at VCU. (Photo courtesy of Mr. Hanu)

their interests. VCU has a strong emphasis on substance use, prevention and education “because there are many VCU faculty members working in this area,” Breland said.

She has a heartfelt connection to the Humphrey fellows. Getting to know people from so many different countries and cultures is her favorite part of the job.

“If I wasn’t in this position I would never have met people from countries such as Myanmar, Togo or Uruguay,” Breland said. “I have an incredible opportunity to meet people from different countries and cultures.”

Hanu also has a strong connection to the Humphrey Fellows Program.

“It brings mid-career professionals from all over the world, especially from developing countries to the U.S. for a year of study in hopes that these professionals become change agents on their return to their respective countries,” he said.

“The focus of the program is solely professional development. This is achieved by affiliation to a U.S.-based institution, which provides the fellow an opportunity to work with an expert in his or her field of study, and to establish professional contacts. The program is also about cultural exchange and leadership development. It is an institution in the U.S. to make contact with the experts in your field and establish professional contacts.”

The program equips the fellows with leadership skills and with current research findings in their field of study.

Hanu is eager to apply in Ghana the skills and ideas he is learning at VCU.

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“I want to help people to come back to their normal lives – back to society, their families, their jobs – and to see them happy. It is a joy that money cannot buy. That’s what keeps me going, and I’ve been doing this for 15 years and counting,” he said.

Hanu said the work ethics and training are similar in Ghana as they are here, but the resources are limited. “We don’t have a constant supply of medications and our emergency response system is poor. People with mental health challenges are not well catered for due these challenges. You could easily die in cases of emergencies.”

In Ghana, substance abuse is treated as “an acute illness,” Hanu said. “Psychological services are not available. Abusers only have contact with psychiatrists when they start to act abnormally.”

“In Ghana, it is easy for an individual with addiction problems to be jailed because it is illegal to be found with such substances. Moreover, there are no institutionalized services for such people. The only type of services available is the therapeutic community concept and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. However, these are not widely available,” Hanu said.

The most common substance abuse problem in Ghana involves alcohol.

“It is easily available because of my culture – it seems to be key,” Hanu said. “When a child is born, a drop of alcohol and water is placed on the child’s tongue to signify truth and lies. It is the child’s first experience with alcohol and it is done usually on the eighth day, called the Naming Ceremony.”

Many people associate substance abuse

and mental illness with adults, but that is not necessarily the case. Adolescents also are affected in Ghana.

“Marijuana is the second most common drug. The young ones in schools are using it, as well as people in the show business. According to the World Drug Report, marijuana is the most common reason why people will seek treatment for addiction services, and the treatment gap is over 90 percent,” Hanu said.

Like most states, Ghana has criminalized marijuana. Hanu believes that has made the problem worse: “I think if marijuana was legalized, the harms associated to its use will reduce drastically, such as criminal records on our teenagers. Research is indicating that it is a fallacy to think that legalization will lead to increased use.”

“Marijuana used for medical purposes is excellent,” he said. “In the 12th century, it was used to kill so many illnesses. In fact, marijuana use for medical purposes dates back to 2700 B.C. when it was used to cure all sorts of ailments such as dysentery, fever, constipation, etc. The drug was included in the U.S. Pharmacopeia, the official list of recognized medical drugs from 1850 through 1942.”

Hanu said moderation is the key to avoiding addictions.

“Anything you abuse is dangerous – even if you abuse water or sugar or coffee, it’s dangerous,” he said. “So if you abuse marijuana or alcohol, or any such drug, you will suffer from its adverse consequences if not now, then later. People who use it in moderation are fine,” he said.

“However, we wish teenagers would delay their drug usage. The brain of teenagers continues to



The 2016-2017 Humphrey Fellows at VCU

develop right up to the early 20s, so the effects of drug abuse are detrimental to the brain's development."

Moreover, Hanu said Ghana should follow the U.S. in enforcing laws aimed at preventing overindulgence. He learned how strict the U.S. is from a bartender in Richmond.

"One good observation I have noticed here in America is that the laws are enforced. Policies such as driving under the influence and underage drinking are big issues here," Hanu said.

"I tell you, one Friday, I was hanging out with graduate students on one of their nights out, and I wanted to buy myself a drink. The attendant refused to sell me the drink because I couldn't produce my ID. You could imagine the look on my face. I was like, 'For goodness' sake, can't you see that I am well over 21 years?'"

"In Ghana, this will never happen. This is called 'Responsible Bar attendant,' and I know these are training programs for bar attendants to be responsible. These are some of the policies I will take to my country."

Hanu said the lessons he has learned as a Humphrey fellow will help improve addiction treatment in his homeland.

"I am hoping that Ghana's addiction services will be a well-integrated service which will be a model for training of future addiction specialists all over the world." •