

**Newsmaker Interviews:  
Wilfred Mbacham, Ph.D.  
November 14, 2005**

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**INTERVIEWER:** Wilfred Mbacham, with the local MIM Organizing Secretariat. I thank you so much for joining us today.

**WILFRED MBACHAM, PH.D.:** Thank you.

**INTERVIEWER:** So could you please just start off by explaining to us why Cameroon was chosen to host the MIM Conference in 2005.

**WILFRED MBACHAM, PH.D.:** Well, Cameroon really wasn't chosen. I think when they beat us out for the Pan-African countries to compete to host the Fourth MIM African summit on malaria, we, the scientists in this country, came together and put together an application demonstrating the [inaudible] we had and also the fact that we had a very high concentration of malaria researches in Cameroon. And when we demonstrated that the infrastructure was there to host anything of this magnitude, I think that the decision was [inaudible] to be made now, [inaudible].

**INTERVIEWER:** Now, you mentioned that local scientists were essential in helping to put this bid together [inaudible] here. Can you talk to us about the importance of capacity building in terms of scientific research or actual African science to be doing this research to help in the fight against malaria?

**WILFRED MBACHAM, PH.D.:** Well, I think you all would

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know that Africa faces a lot of problems, one of which is capacity building. Now, capacity building—I tend not to use building again and I'd rather refer to it as capacity development—because every time you build you must try to maintain. And Africa has been facing this difficulty of maintaining its researchers in Africa. And I think that there are two levels in which capacity needs to be developed.

First, those are the grass roots we need to implement most of the research decisions and the findings that [inaudible]. It's one level where capacity needs to be developed.

The other capacity development is like the level of the high level of the top scientists. And the third level of capacity development is infrastructure to be able to support the scientist and create an enabling environment for them to be able to work.

Now putting these three together is quite enigmatic, especially to governments that have not to well an economy. And I think that it is up to us as scientists to re-invent the-ourselves after we leave school and to look for things to do. I mean partial development to make those things happen.

Money always is not all that—you know somebody growing up knows or wishes to have. I think it's also said that the riches upon individual out of context we make. And I think that Africans need to capitalize on this context and be able to

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improve on their own lot by staying and making sacrifices. Other nations are developed because people made the sacrifices. And I think that is an essential philosophy for people to take on to that and to be able to maintain it.

**INTERVIEWER:** Now you mentioned that capacity building and maintaining capacity was one of the issues that Africa faces as it's fighting malaria. What do you see as maybe some of the other top two issues?

**WILFRED MBACHAM, PH.D.:** Well I think one of the issues is the fact that diseases are not addressed as having a microbe origin or pathogenic origin. We ascribe disease to all of the mystical origins and it's difficult to conceptualize what disease really is.

Having said that difficulty, I think it directly also hinges on human behavior. And malaria like HIV is also a behavioral problem. People take medications—once they feel better, they dump it. They don't understand that the parasites may still be lingering in their body. And once they feel better, it's over. And then the drops are reserved for someone else.

So I think malaria—if you look at the U.S. history as well, you realize that when malaria was present in some parts of the US it had a cycle of incidents that interspersed—was interspersed with poverty, especially in the trenches. So basically, it's a disease that is also directly related to

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poverty, and I think that being the one of the crucial problems. People tend to address issues related to malaria with the most minimal concerns. I think that's also the difficulty that malaria researchers face.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you mentioned that it's a mysterious disease, not attributing it to any sort of a microbe with an issue here in Africa, how do you think that you can take this as a scientific? How do you take these scientific developments and the research that's being presented and actually implement that in local villages or urban settings that [inaudible]?

**WILFRED MBACHAM, PH.D.:** Well I started a program—I started an organization called the Fobang Foundation, which is an immense organization and has been existing since 1998. When I came back and realized that most of what we were doing in the laboratories and on the paper was not being told to the people. And bringing to the notice of the tough subject—but I think that they could derive an immediate understanding of—and be able to use that both for their own context of obtaining better cure.

So we have this program the Fobong Foundation that relates directly to how people behave in seeking therapy, especially malaria. And I explained very simple things to them. And I think for the different sites in which we have these programs, that it's now understood that the—all fevers are not malaria and we're happy about that.

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And for us to be able to achieve this, we create a network of school health club teachers who, in turn, teach the students and let the students take the messages back to their parents as ambassadors of health. And I think that has been very highly successful.

The intention is when we sponsor to do these—actually also attending this meeting—so that we can derive on every evening—we meet to discuss what the findings are and to let them know how they derive maximum benefits. And we hope that they as learners become teachers as well and take this information back to where it's needed.

And I think that increasingly we're beginning to see some kind of a reaction to what people have understood. I know that some of these diseases don't have [inaudible] origins, and so that can be explained, and they can be addressed, and they can be attacked to make them derive the best of health.

**INTERVIEWER:** Can you tell me what you think that maybe the one or two things that you hope that this conference will accomplish [dropped audio]?

**WILFRED MBACHAM, PH.D.:** The first thing is that for the first time researcher and control money that have come together. That's a novelty. And malaria has never seen this before. I hope that this momentum will be able to continue.

The second thing that I know is happening at this meeting is the fact that funders [misspelled?] who otherwise

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just gave money and said, "Go do your thing," are now becoming interested in what it is that Africans wish to do for themselves. And the presence of funders at this meeting and seeing exactly what the difficulties are at first hand, I think it's a major stride. And I think we're going to see quite a few changes in the way malaria is going to be addressed in the future.

I know that—since a [inaudible] financiers never knew what a [inaudible] declarations were. But some of them have been educated since yesterday on what their [inaudible] declaration meant. And I'm very happy that at the end of this week—instead of having another declaration—on another declaration we're going to have what we call a "call to action on malaria," which is taking the issues into very pragmatic and very practical steps to see that all the things that heads of states assembled to address them are actually being cemented.

**INTERVIEWER:** And how do you see in the next few years the MIM Secretariat actually implementing the "call to action"?

**WILFRED MBACHAM, PH.D.:** Well I'm glad that the MIM Secretariat is moving to Africa for the first time since its creation. And I'm sure that there are things that are very, very African and can only be understood by Africans. But these things will also be made known to the Western World. And I think that by it moving to Africa, it's giving us a lot of support already on all that needs to be known. My hope and

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desire would be that as MIM Secretariat moves to Africa it should be all encompassing, and to grow on the many talents around the world or around Africa, and to show that it is something in which everybody's involved.

And I'm sure that we'll see quite a few changes on the way malaria is going to be addressed. Luckily, it's going to be good—be very much involved also in capacity development. And I'm sure that Ben Kalama [misspelled?] and the Amaned [misspelled?] Group will do a very good job. Cameroon lost in the bid, and we're happy that Amaned took it. And we hope that the next time around we'll come around to grasp [misspelled?] it.

**INTERVIEWER:** WILFRED MBACHAM, Ph.D., thank you so much for joining us today.

**WILFRED MBACHAM, PH.D.:** Thank you.

**INTERVIEWER:** We appreciate your time.

**WILFRED MBACHAM, PH.D.:** Thank you very much.

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