

## RENEW YOUR STRENGTH AND PREVENT DISEASE: THE DIMONA SYSTEM

In a manner typifying the demeanor and discipline of a military man, Major Courage Quashigah (rtd.), surveyed the battlefield. This was not the usual battlefield challenge. Yet these were the usual casualties: painful loss of life and limb, lives cut short, grieved families. In his current campaign as Ghana's Minister of Health, the Honorable Minister Quashigah has identified the primary enemies of the Ghanaian people: avoidable sickness and disease.

Indeed, current data shows that not only has Ghana's life expectancy dropped from our heady days of independence, when we struggled to control the scourges of malaria, polio, and other communicable diseases (NCD's) "diseases of choice". Diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and cancer afflictions little known in our previous generations now threaten to overtake our ranks. Because of poor dietary and lifestyle choices we are losing ground to the "enemy within".

Yet, the Minister determined to lead an all-out effort to mobilize its forces to overcome this adversary and to eliminate such self-inflicted wounds. He declared that he would "not preside over a Ministry of Ill-Health" and vowed to do his part in realizing the goal of His Excellency President John Kufuor, for Ghana to attain middle-income status by 2015. But it quickly became apparent that this would not be possible, given the health sector's increasing reliance on costly pharmaceuticals, high-tech equipment and facilities. Although global trends confirm the need for a radical change in the approach to health care, the world's most "developed" nations currently find themselves trapped in the old thinking: sickness and disease has become big business.

His search for an appropriate strategy to meet these objectives led him to announce a "paradigm shift" in Ministry of Health (MOH) policy from focus on "orthodox" curative care to a focus on prevention. The need for treatment and institutional care of the ill is an acknowledged essential responsibility of the health sector. Yet, in order to prevent the sector (and indeed the entire country) from being inundated by the high cost of health care, a new direction for thinking was also an obvious necessity.

Calling for the creation of "Wealth through Health", Minister Quashigah points out that the responsibility for our health ought to lie first and foremost with an empowered individual and community. After all, who is primarily responsible for the daily decisions we make relative to the foods and drinks we consume (or don't consume) and the activities we engage in? Correctly informed, those who also stand to be the primary beneficiaries of this empowerment would be the community and not the government.

The Minister's dogged inquiry as to the correctness of his vision led him to Israel and a group of Africans with a remarkable track record in the health arena: the African Hebrew Israelites' "Village of Peace" in Dimona, Israel.

The "Village of Peace", a prototype of modern-African village, is so-named due to the relative absence of strife and conflict, crime and violence... yes, even sickness and disease. In this community of more than 3,000 African men, women and children they have virtually eliminated hypertension, diabetes, cancer and other modern scourges while raising three generations who have not witnessed a death among their peers to disease.

Residents of this community, the majority of whom are former African-Americans regard Israel as being in northeastern Africa, not the "Middle East" and are quite capable of defending their argument. In fact, they have documented the substantive ancient historical and cultural links via their oral traditions and migration patterns of several Ghanaian ethnic groups to Israel.

During his visit to Dimona, Minister Quashigah witnessed the results of more than 40 years of experience in successful, preventive health maintenance. That success comprises the "Dimona Model": holistic health care strategies that have been applied in areas of healthy living proper diet and nutrition and maternal and infant health care.

Dimona: A health literate community

Reminiscent of traditional African values, children of all ages in the "Village of Peace" respect their elders, learn and play freely, are free from the fear of being killed, kidnapped or harmed in anyway. Again, consistent with life in an African village, they practice a tight-knit communal lifestyle wherein every member is responsible for contributing according to their ability and receives according to their needs. This mindset extends into their health care strategy as all residents are charged to maintain the physical environment and spiritual sanctity of the entire community. In short, the thinking dominates that everything matters where our health is concerned.

The result of this new thinking and application are self-evident. The community boasts a 75-year "young" marathon winner. Male and female sportsmen, teenagers to over 60 years of age, male and female actively participate and consistently excel in national organized track and field, softball and basketball.

All African Hebrew Israelites must maintain a collective consciousness concerning the promotion of good person and community health and hygiene. This consciousness and awareness is part of what in Dimona has been defined as "health literacy": "the understanding that the individual himself is the first line of defense against disease." This awareness "affirms the bond between an individual's mind and body that is necessary for protecting his health." Hence, critical attention is given throughout the developmental period of the children which will empower them just as much as the more familiar academic "literacy".

A new paradigm for health care in Ghana

The Ministry of Health has developed the regenerative Health and Nutrition Program (RHNP) in order to sensitize the Ghanaian public and to lay the groundwork for institutionalizing the new paradigm. To assist in effectively communicating the program's principles and demonstrate the most effective means and methods for the practical application, a team of specialists from the African Hebrew Development Agency (AHDA) is working to provide technical support.

"Distilling more than four decades of experience into a week-long program was a challenge", said Dr. Ahmadiel Ben yehuda, a Healthy Lifestyle Specialist with the AHDA team. "However, we are able to share the basic understanding of a lifestyle which we can guarantee will provide positive results. The application of these simple principles over the last 40-plus years the vegan diet, regular exercise, environmental cleanliness, personal hygiene, abstention from harmful behavior have effectively removed from our midst sickness and death". By demonstrating these connections between health and lifestyle changes that are within our control, the Dimona experience even counters the widely-circulated idea of Africans being "genetically predisposed" to certain diseases, which would seem to promise a permanent predicament for our people.

Creating "agents of Change"

The RHNP motto promises to "Renew Your Strength and Prevent Diseases", in fulfillment of God's promise to man of perfect health and everlasting life. This new thinking offers the prospect of increased longevity and vitality. "Project Regen" aims to bring the essential principles

Distilled from the experience of the “Dimona Health Model”. The collaboration has generated great excitement and already demonstrated itself to be a powerful motivating force in this crucial effort to defeat sickness and disease.

The initial phase of the RHNP training aims to create “Agents of Change” community-based leaders from a cross-section of the society (health personnel, traditional chiefs, and queen mothers, agric officers, midwives, TBA's, teachers, school matrons, caterers, etc.). Once sensitized to the benefits of the changes, they are charged to inspire and influence others in their circles. Early findings show great success in the sustainability of the advocacy component. A later phase of the program will establish an institution to provide further in-depth instruction in these life-giving principles.

As such, the principle being advocated in the new paradigm are not new at all. In fact the ideas and values conveyed in the RHNP training courses embody a response to the Honourable Minister's call to vindicate the “neglect of the wisdom bequeathed to Africans by their ancestors as a betrayal which needs to be neglected.” Indeed, RHNP affords a vibrant revival of long-neglected health-giving practices and traditions capable of the Minister's challenge to “transform the wisdom of the ancestors into knowledge that can stand the test of this age.”

AHDA specialists deliver the essential Regenerative Health messages in three areas of focus: healthy lifestyles, nutrition, and mother-child care. Typically, the messages overlap due to the holistic nature of health, which actually assists in comprehension of the new thinking. In addition to receiving instruction in nutritional requirements of the family, participants receive hands-on experience in the actual creation of healthy vegan (strict plant-based) dishes and menus. Great attention is given to the preparation of meals utilizing locally-available foods, particularly fruits and vegetables.

Over 1,100 babies have been born naturally in Dimona's “House of Life”, the community's holistic health care center, with only .025% infant mortality rate and not maternal mortality; without the use of drugs or invasive surgical procedures. “Our lifestyle assists our mothers to be able to safely pass through various stages: from antenatal, to the natural birth process, to post-partum with virtually no complications,” according to Ahedahlyah Baht Israel, AHDA Mother and Child Health Specialist. “Babies are breastfed upon delivery, average more than 3 kilos at birth and are alert and active because of our return to natural traditional birthing practices. Our formula is simple: a healthy mother=healthy children=a healthy nation.”

Other health-enhancing techniques are employed in the Dimona model, including touch therapy (massage), deep breathing and hydrotherapy (the use of water to assist in the internal cleansing of the body). Earlier generations of Ghanaians will recall the use of the “gourd”.

“In our search for health, we've literally left 'no stone unturned', but have no monopoly on what we find either”