



2010 AWARD Fellow Matilda Ayim-Akonor

Position:	Research officer
Institution:	Council of Scientific and Industrial Research Animal Research Institute
Country:	Ghana
MPhil:	Clinical Microbiology Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2007
Mentored by:	Dr. Frederick Yeboah Obese, Senior Lecturer (Animal Physiology) Department of Animal Science College of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences University of Ghana

Research Area: Assessing the prevalence of emerging diseases, and diseases with high morbidity but low mortality, in livestock and poultry in rural Ghana.

Matilda Ayim-Akonor is fighting livestock diseases that have caused the collapse of many large farms in Ghana and that threaten the extinction of the few that remain, particularly poultry operations. Ghana's total poultry population is estimated to be more than 20 million, 80 percent of which are rural scavenging chickens. Of these, 80 percent are lost annually due to outbreaks of Newcastle disease and other causes.

While Ayim-Akonor is fascinated by animal virology, farmers are her real focus. "My goal is to help farmers increase their earnings and reduce unemployment, while rekindling interest in livestock and poultry production, particularly among the youth," says Ayim-Akonor. "In my research, I use modern diagnostic methods, particularly the application of the polymerase chain reaction technique that allows veterinarians to promptly and accurately treat the disease before the farmer loses another animal."

Ayim-Akonor is also involved in projects that are testing the sensitivity of some bacteria strains and viruses to commercial antibiotics and vaccines, in collaboration with local and international organizations. "For example, with the International Atomic Energy Agency, I work with a team that is validating the sensitivity and specificity of test kits developed to diagnose and differentiate Rinderpest virus from peste des petits ruminants (PPR) virus," she explains. Ayim-Akonor is also working on a pioneer project to develop a DNA fingerprint for indigenous livestock.

An ambitious young scientist, Ayim-Akonor wants to sharpen her research skills in animal health, particularly virology, by obtaining her PhD—becoming the first woman in her institute to do so.

"Most women researchers have goals and dreams, but only a few achieve them, partly because our society pressures us to marry young and have families, and in the process we forget our own needs and aspirations," says Ayim-Akonor. "It's helpful to be an understudy to someone in the same environment who has succeeded despite all the odds."

In 2009, a senior colleague, Patricia Aboe, who is an AWARD Fellow, chose Ayim-Akonor as a mentee, passing on knowledge and experience gained in the fellowship. “She helped me to improve my presentation skills and encouraged me to speak up at meetings. I also learned the difference between being aggressive and being assertive. Now people are starting to hear me.”

With Aboe’s guidance, Ayim-Akonor developed a research proposal and wrote a paper that was accepted for presentation at a conference in Accra. More self-confident, she applied for an AWARD Fellowship—for the third time—and was selected from among 784 applicants.

“For me, the best thing about being an AWARD Fellow is knowing that someone has seen my potential and is investing in me,” says Ayim-Akonor, who looks forward to working with Dr. Obese, her AWARD mentor who is a senior lecturer in animal science.

As head of a three-person molecular biology team, Ayim-Akonor hopes to develop her management skills through AWARD’s leadership courses, enabling her to cope better with workplace challenges. “I work with many older, male veterinary officers who sometimes see me as a competitor, rather than as a collaborator.”

Ayim-Akonor says she also looks forward to being trained on the use of e-libraries so she can access the latest research on animal virology. “AWARD offers lots of opportunities, but I see it as a self-development program. It’s up to me. With AWARD’s support, I have no excuse not to succeed.”

Ayim-Akonor is one of 180 African woman scientists who have won an AWARD Fellowship. AWARD is a professional development program that strengthens the research and leadership skills of African women in agricultural science, empowering them to contribute more effectively to poverty alleviation and food security in sub-Saharan Africa. For more information, visit www.awardfellowships.org
