

Kwaku Ohene-Frempong, Pediatrics

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Kwaku Ohene-Frempong

Kwaku Ohene-Frempong (often known by his initials, KOF), a professor emeritus of pediatrics in the Perelman School of Medicine and director emeritus of the Comprehensive Sickle Cell Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), passed away from complications of metastatic lung cancer on May 7. He was 76.

Dr. Ohene-Frempong was born in Kukurantumi, Ghana. His father was a cocoa farmer and a prominent member of a royal family. He attended a boarding school, Prempeh College, then came to the U.S. He received a BS in biology from Yale University in 1970, where he was also captain of the track and field team, setting indoor and outdoor records in the high hurdles. He then received an MD from Yale in 1975 and completed a residency at New York Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center in Manhattan, then studied pediatric hematology at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

A week after graduating from Yale in 1970, Dr. Ohene-Frempong married Janet Williams, a recent graduate of Cornell University. In 1972, their first child, Kwame, was born, and was shortly thereafter diagnosed with sickle-cell disease, a fatal genetic condition (from which he passed away in 2013). Dr. Ohene-Frempong made it his mission to combat the disease. In 1980, he joined the faculty of the Tulane University School of Medicine in New Orleans, where he was an associate professor of pediatrics. There, he also established the Tulane Sickle Cell Center of Southern Louisiana and worked with the state of Louisiana to develop a newborn screening program for the disease. In 1986, however, he returned to CHOP and, this time, Penn. That year, he joined Penn's School of Medicine faculty as an assistant professor of pediatrics. He was promoted to full professor in 1997.

At CHOP, Dr. Ohene-Frempong founded the Comprehensive Sickle Cell Center, which attracted federal grant money and conducted leading research on the disease. He studied the natural course of sickle cell disease (blockages in blood vessels in the brain), which led to scientific ability to predict how the disease would develop and which children were at the highest risk. Dr. Ohene-Frempong extended his scientific expertise to his home country of Ghana, founding the Kumasi Center for Sickle Cell Disease and eventually leaving Penn to work in Kumasi full-time. Dr. Penn retired from Penn in 2011 and took emeritus status.

As part of his work in Ghana, Dr. Ohene-Frempong became president of the Sickle Cell Foundation of Ghana and the national coordinator of the American Society of Hematology's Consortium on Newborn Screening in Africa. Dr. Ohene-Frempong was widely acknowledged in the U.S. and in Ghana for his work, receiving the Order of the Volta (2010) and the Millennium Excellence Award (2015) in Ghana. In 2020, he received the Assistant Secretary of Health Exceptional Service Medal from the Department of Health and Human Services. The next year, the American Society for Hematology honored him with its Stratton Award for Translational and Clinical Science.

"I relied on his wisdom at almost every turn in my career," said Dr. Ohene-Frempong's colleague at CHOP, Alexis Thompson. "Part of it was watching with this tremendous awe what his vision was and the things he thought to do to move this field forward."

Dr. Ohene-Frempong is survived by his wife, Janet; his daughter, Afia; three brothers, Kwabena Ohene-Dokyi, Kwasi Ohene-Owusu and Reynolds Twumasi; a sister, Ama Ohene-Agyeiwaa Boateng; and two grandchildren.