Learning from world-class researchers at Menzies

Read about Celestine Aho’s postgraduate studies with Menzies School of Health Research to get a better picture of a researcher’s life.

Menzies School of Health Research PhD candidate and international student Celestine Aho knew of Menzies’ work long before she moved to Darwin to begin her research. Menzies School of Health Research is one of Australia’s leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving Indigenous, global and tropical health.

Through her work in the laboratory of a research institute in her native Papua New Guinea, Celestine had been involved in collaborations between the institutes. She had also been to Darwin a number of years prior to commencing her PhD to learn about molecular techniques and was pleased she would be working directly with a few familiar faces. The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Australia Awards scholarship recipient knew she would be learning from pioneers in the field at Menzies.

Celestine’s thesis, which looks at understanding the pathogens associated with otitis media in children from at-risk populations in the Northern Territory and PNG will make her one of the few people working on otitis media in her home country.

Otitis media is an infection of the middle ear. The Northern Territory has the highest recorded prevalence of otitis media in the world, and much of the research into it comes out of Menzies, which has campuses at Charles Darwin University and the Royal Darwin Hospital.

‘Otitis media is not very well-researched in PNG. Most of the research there tends to focus on higher profile diseases like malaria, pneumonia and tuberculosis, which can lead to sickness and death,’ Celestine said. ‘But otitis media can lead to hearing loss, which affects all facets of a child’s life, from their early learning and language development to job prospects later on in life.’

As part of her research, Celestine divides her time writing, analysing data, and examining samples in the well-equipped Menzies laboratory. Part of her work involved running polymerase chain reaction tests to detect bacterial DNA in samples of ear discharge collected from children with a serious inflammation of the middle ear, known as chronic suppurative otitis media.

Now in her final year of her candidacy, Celestine said she enjoyed working with leading researchers who were supportive and passionate about their work. ‘I’m so fortunate to be here, doing research that directly impacts on lives,’ she said. ‘The people here are friendly, easy to get along with, and are very helpful.’

Off campus, Darwin’s warm, relaxed and easy-going lifestyle appeals to Celestine. ‘Coming from a slow, small town, it was easy to adjust to life here,’ she said, adding she enjoyed the dry season from May to October, and the outdoor markets. ‘I like going for walks on the beach and enjoying the spectacular sunsets, the weather is also beautiful and is not too cold.’

Celestine has also taken the opportunity to visit stunning natural parks close to Darwin, including Litchfield National Park and Berry Springs Nature Park. She has also made friends with staff and students at Menzies, Charles Darwin University and in Darwin who hail from all over the world.

‘Darwin is a very multicultural place, which makes it easy for me as an international student,’ she said.