

Oral presentation

The brain – Africa's finest and most vulnerable product

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By the usual measures of wealth, sub-Saharan African countries are among the world's poorest. But they possess at least 3/4 billion of the most complex, productive and underutilized structures in the known universe. These human brains have a potential that we have hardly begun to explore, much less to quantify. The capacity to realize this wealth is threatened by damage to the structures themselves and by our joint failure to train, marshal and deploy this collectively huge resource.

This conference will pay particular attention to the first of these threats. Damage to the brain is a hazard at each stage of an individual's development – *in utero* (mainly infections, nearly all of which are augmented by the current HIV pandemic), at parturition (largely owing to severe constraints in obstetric services), in infancy and childhood (from nutritional inadequacies and infections, both being aggravated by HIV) and in adulthood (when HIV is restoring infections to the top of the list, but non-infectious diseases are increasingly recognized).

Although threats to brain quality abound at each stage of life, the majority of individuals retain a fully functioning central nervous system. We now have the opportunity to devote increasing attention to the mechanisms that exist, and more especially to those that do not exist but could, for harnessing this wealth more effectively. Training in clinical and research expertise is an enormous and urgent opportunity, needed by all countries. African scientists and clinicians can both contribute to and benefit from this. Many specific initiatives have been launched, but the effort – judged by its size and intensity – remains in its

infancy, and potentially productive avenues remain unexploited or deserve to be multiplied by orders of magnitude. In particular, links between distant institutions have been shown to generate benefits for both partners on many levels. These should multiply from a few shining examples to a prolific network. We might then begin to show that we recognize true wealth and know how to nurture it.