

00:00:03:04 - 00:00:29:09

Adam

Hello and welcome to Microbe Talk, the podcast by the Microbiology Society. I'm Adam and I will be your host today when in-person teaching came to a halt during lockdown while studying. Akpan Friday from Nigeria reached out on social media for lecturers to help continue his and his classmates education. The call was answered by Doctor Beth Mills and from this interaction a mentorship developed.

00:00:29:13 - 00:00:45:04

Adam

I spoke to both Akpan Friday and Beth about international collaboration, the importance of mentorship and what they have both gained from helping each other. Hi both, thank you so much for joining us. Could you introduce yourselves, please?

00:00:45:06 - 00:00:51:21

Beth

Yeah, sure. So I'm Doctor Beth Mills. I'm based at the University of Edinburgh. I'm a UK Future Leaders Fellow.

00:00:51:24 - 00:01:10:11

Akap Friday

My name is up on Friday and I'm an analyst at the Celina Center for International Development and Research and Mental health consulting. Public health consulting. What we do is, health systems training and strategic advisory for companies and organizations.

00:01:10:17 - 00:01:14:12

Adam

Thank you very much. So how did you both meet?

00:01:14:14 - 00:01:42:17

Beth

It was 2020, I think it was March. So we were just there in that first lockdown of Covid. Everyone had been sent home, and one of my colleagues at she sent me a message to say, oh, I've seen this post on Twitter by at Camp Friday asking for lecturers to come and or scientists to come and give lectures to him and his class, who were currently suspended from their studies for various reasons going on.

00:01:42:18 - 00:01:56:09

Beth

And, I thought it sounded really fun, really interesting. I am interested in global health and I've worked in that area for a long time, so it seems like a perfect opportunity to really, engage with this community as well.

00:01:56:11 - 00:02:19:03

Akap Friday

Yes. So, just to mention, I mean, it was just too much as well that we had said, it was, during Covid and everyone was locked up in their houses, so and wearing, going to school. And I was like, oh, okay. I think, you know, the West people are having, you know, indication from whom. And we are not doing anything at home.

00:02:19:03 - 00:02:43:02

Akap Friday

How can I just reach out to people and get them to teach my class internationally? And, I was reaching out. I just put out a post on Twitter and I had different responses. People just replying, sending tweets. Oh, I'm interested. And but the bed particularly sent me a DM and she was like, you know, your colleague passed on your name to me.

00:02:43:02 - 00:03:06:02

Akap Friday

I would love to volunteer to take you guys. And I think she did wonderfully well. She was very supportive. Because a lot of us, as at that time didn't have, a good internet connection for the classes. And she offered to use our unpaid zoom account. She took us to classes, and she also sent us a lecture notes.

00:03:06:03 - 00:03:27:04

Akap Friday

Then, I mean, that was one of the best connection I made, as at that time, I felt, wow. I mean, people here wouldn't want to do that for free. But you have people outside the country who want to take you for free. I was really amazed. I was like, I had to run and tell my mom that, oh, you know, I mean.

00:03:27:06 - 00:03:27:24

Beth

People are taking.

00:03:27:24 - 00:03:33:08

Akap Friday

Notes for free, but I mean, it was really it was really great. And, I really appreciate her for that.

00:03:33:10 - 00:03:35:05

Adam

What what were you teaching Beth?

00:03:35:07 - 00:04:09:24

Beth

Yeah. So the the seminar, a lecture that I gave was on microscopy, actually, you know, fundamental to microbiology students. But one of the reasons why I was so excited to give this particular talk is that I've worked in developing low cost microscopy solutions primarily based on optical and fluorescence imaging. So I thought that it was a perfect opportunity to sort of say, this is where the field is, and this is where the field would want to go or hopefully might go if some of the technologies we're developing, might be taken up in others as well, you know, such as, the Ford Scope and things.

00:04:09:24 - 00:04:19:16

Beth

So just, the applications and opportunities that might be applicable to some of the lower resource settings, like across Nigeria where we need different technologies.

00:04:19:22 - 00:04:30:17

Adam

So from your connection, you have grown into a kind of mentor mentee relationship. What have been the benefits of this, particularly it being an international collaboration?

00:04:30:19 - 00:05:00:06

Akap Friday

Yeah. I think one of the benefits that you get from connecting with people from a different country, it's one, international collaboration and exposure to a lot of opportunities, particularly when you're connecting with them. You know, if you don't have a mentor outside, you don't have someone who is outside of you on zone. You don't know what opportunities are outside there.

00:05:00:06 - 00:05:30:13

Akap Friday

I mean, it's a global world. You can find some of these opportunities online. But I mean, you already have someone pointing you in the right direction. Look here. This is rarity. These are opportunities you I will get a very particular example. Just this chaplain's team. I mean, that's a bit of that. I mean, I would just, you know, going to work and I just received a meal from doctor a bit and she said, well, she went for a conference and she heard about the champions scheme.

00:05:30:15 - 00:05:52:04

Akap Friday

And let me even tell you one very good part of that. She was like, oh, maybe you could become a member of the microbiology society. I think you could go through the athletes. I mean, but she and she wrote, I think it's free, but if it involves you, I could pay for you. So I was like, wow. I mean, so I was really interested.

00:05:52:04 - 00:06:08:24

Akap Friday

I made me sign up and I was like, because I'm really passionate about promoting microbiology. And I looked at the champions scheme. It was something that really aligned with me, and that was how I even got to know about the champion scheme. I didn't know about it. So this is one of the scenario, of someone pointing you to the right direction.

00:06:09:03 - 00:06:23:11

Akap Friday

If you do not have someone pointing you to the right direction and telling you, okay, apply for this opportunity. Okay? Andrew, here. Do this. You will really have, a targeted direction towards this. That's one of the benefits.

00:06:23:15 - 00:06:26:09

Adam

And what about yourself, Beth? How have you benefited from it?

00:06:26:13 - 00:06:51:23

Beth

Many, many things I got from international collaboration. My day to day job is heavily collaborative with partners in India, primarily actually, but I think there's so much, so much we learn from one another by directly knowing each other in an informal way and not necessarily even directly around a project, because that's how we learn, sort of at the side around the context within which we research and work.

00:06:51:23 - 00:07:21:16

Beth

So from working with Pam Friday, we I now have a much better understanding of, you know, where he is coming from and other researchers from Nigeria. Some of the challenges that you know, you might face through your education and trying to get jobs and opportunities in the effort that you need to put in. And I think from, I guess, my perspective in many ways, recruiting PhD students, understanding why people have come from in that context actually provides a much broader picture of who might be applying and why.

00:07:21:18 - 00:07:48:19

Beth

I think directly for the research. International collaboration is fundamental for me. I've already said, you know, I work in this space of developing low cost solutions for, treating and diagnosing infections. I work a lot in India with my partners in India, the Arvind Eyecare system. They really show me the clinical need and the the gaps that are needed to improve outcomes for patients.

00:07:48:19 - 00:08:14:11

Beth

And so by working hand-in-hand with them, it means that we can make and co-develop solutions that are clinically tractable and relevant and will be the quickest way to have an impact for the real world scenario. And at the time that I met, at come Friday, you know, I was a postdoctoral researcher starting to write my own fellowships and think about the direction, the trajectory that my career would go in and what look like.

00:08:14:11 - 00:08:43:20

Beth

And so from an especially the initial conversations that we had when we were sort of first meeting, actually, I could sort of compare my Indian context to the context you were telling me

about microbiology as a profession, about the health care system, about antimicrobial resistance, and some of the challenges that you face there. So it means that directly I have first hand knowledge, an account of, different perspectives and scenarios, I think sometimes can be lumped together, you know, in the context of low middle income countries.

00:08:43:20 - 00:09:05:16

Beth

You know, that's how we describe it. But actually the, the nuance and different and actually by working with people from those communities, they become champions. They lead the questions for me, actually, I you know, I'm, I like challenge led research. They tell me the challenges, they tell me the problems, why it might not be adopted if we do it this way, but if we do it this way, it could be better.

00:09:05:16 - 00:09:18:24

Beth

And really getting firsthand accounts from people that often are not spoken to and things are put upon them. So, yeah, there's many, many reasons why I think international collaboration is so important, both on a formal and informal level.

00:09:19:01 - 00:09:26:23

Adam

I mentioned about the mentor mentee relationship. Is that something that has been said or it's just developed over time?

00:09:27:00 - 00:09:57:13

Akap Friday

Okay. So I think, if I should come in here, so if you do watch Simon Sinek. Lots. Yeah. So he talks about main told me T and how to discover your way and you know, he talks about mentor mentee relationship is formed over time. Right. So when you become friends with so when you just start conversing conversing and then one day you're just like, I like that you're my mentor.

00:09:57:15 - 00:10:24:21

Akap Friday

You know, again. So, you know, the person can't just obviously refuse because, the person has, over time, playing the role of a mentor, in your life. Right. And, that's the one thing I really want to I also want to keep in here. Since we are talking about the relevance, it might not be in microbiology related, but it helps you when communicating to build a lot of confidence.

00:10:24:21 - 00:10:51:02

Akap Friday

Conversing with up to bits over time made me build that confidence that yes, it's possible to collaborate with this people is possible to talk with this people. And there's also that possibility of working on synergy, working together to achieve, whatever you want to achieve. We just developed that's me Tommy t relationship. And over time, you can always you see the person like someone you can always want to for any career advice.

00:10:51:02 - 00:11:05:16

Akap Friday

And I mean even sometimes you got tested that way. You could say, okay, this is what's going on in my life. This is how it's affecting my career. How what what steps do I take, you know, and she's always been there to support and I'm really grateful for that.

00:11:05:21 - 00:11:37:08

Beth

We've never sort of formally said, we'll have a mentor mentee relationship and this is how it will work. But I think, you know, you've heard I come Friday talk. He's so enthusiastic. And so, you know, an infectious person to be around. And you really I really, really, responded to actually how proactive he was. You know, in both in organizing this international, seminar series at the beginning and, you know, some of his other things that he's not really spoken about.

00:11:37:08 - 00:12:00:13

Beth

But at the time, he was working with Excel to deliver, opportunities for school children as well in the microbiology sort of pathology space. And at the time, I was thinking if I was an undergrad and my lectures were canceled, there's no way I would be, you know, proactively organizing this for my community and pushing myself and really bringing people along with me in that.

00:12:00:13 - 00:12:20:01

Beth

And that really motivated me. And kind of, is always finding new opportunities, trying and really pushing forwards and quite a lot of difficult circumstances because of, you know, the educational stuff because of Covid and other things. And Open Friday will always check in with me monthly. I think you send me a message just to say hi, new month.

00:12:20:01 - 00:12:42:04

Beth

And it's a good sort of check point. So it means that when I'm out and about, conferences or when I see things online that make me think of him, I can easily just say, oh, I met this person. They work in this field in Nigeria. Can I'll put you in contact and then see if you know, another relationship or another network can happen from there.

00:12:42:04 - 00:12:50:15

Beth

Or here's this funding, stream that I saw. It's just very light touch, but just consistent.

00:12:50:17 - 00:13:06:15

Adam

Just going on from that, Friday, I wanted to ask you about your work around antimicrobial Resistance Awareness Week as a microbiology society champion. And we can get on to how Beth has, supported you during that.

00:13:06:17 - 00:13:35:18

Akap Friday

Yeah. So particularly I had this idea or, you know, using, Lego blocks, to talk about antimicrobial resistance and how evictions, had to treat nowadays. And also to talk about the hygiene parts using fluorescent lotion and UV light. I had the idea for a very long time, I think, since my study in the university, but I always like, oh, I don't really have funding to do it all.

00:13:35:19 - 00:14:03:21

Akap Friday

Want to, where to source it from? Here in Nigeria was it was really a tough thing for me to do. And I was like, okay. So when I saw the opportunity and, I noticed that Doctor Bruno had already mentioned on, base camp that the anyone who wants to collaborate on any activity, any other expertise and not to resist fast food microbiology, I was like, oh, okay, I think he's the best fit for this.

00:14:04:01 - 00:14:24:15

Akap Friday

So I had contacted him via LinkedIn and I told him that we had this activity. I shared the activity with him and were like, wow, it's really nice. I think I would love to do the same activity in the UK.



And I was just I didn't know doctor was that proactive. I made the, just about two days later, I, I didn't give him my contacts.

00:14:24:15 - 00:14:43:16

Akap Friday

I received a call on WhatsApp, and Doctor Bruno have reached out to me like, hey, do you know who is talking? I was like, I don't really know who he's talking. And he was like, yeah, it's Doctor Bruno. I really love the activity. We can do these together. Then he did it and. Oh, man. That's a bonus.

00:14:43:18 - 00:15:06:17

Akap Friday

Like, just sip like an advisor throughout the whole activity. So we were good to go to schools here in Nigeria and also in the UK. And we also planned to do that in the Philippines, too. So we're able to the two schools here in Nigeria, I went to three schools. Doctor Bruno went to about five schools in the UK and were able to reach over several hundred students.

00:15:06:19 - 00:15:26:01

Akap Friday

We had to use UV touch, frozen lotion on your hands. And one of the things I also want to major here is that the benefits, again, the benefits of international collaboration is that, I mean, at first when I looked at it, I could not get the flowers and lotion and the UV light here in the jet, which was quite tough.

00:15:26:03 - 00:15:48:07

Akap Friday

Right. So you had this activity where you had gotten the grant for and you cannot really get the materials you need in Nigeria. I, who I contacted at the events. So I had reached out to have. Please, we need your help. Who? You help us, you know, get these items from the UK and ship them down to Nigeria.

00:15:48:09 - 00:16:15:08

Akap Friday

And she was very excited to do that. She had no hesitation. She bought these items herself with her own money and before getting reimbursed, and she sent it down to Niger, I received to were able to conduct the activity and to very impactful. Yeah, I would say one of the things I've also

done from a mentorship and also because of her mentorship and where I work today, and also I was able to do a very good report for the society.

00:16:15:08 - 00:16:39:23

Akap Friday

I think she can testify to that. Yes. So, I mean, it was a very great activity. And these are the benefits of collaborating with people, helping international people. It gives room for that collaboration. It gives you for global, activities. And this helps you understand, right? I at first I just thought I would do this activity here in Nigeria.

00:16:39:23 - 00:16:54:18

Akap Friday

But there are also other lessons we could learn from the UK. Right. Yeah. Seen those lessons and the results to see that people in the UK have more knowledge, children, on knowledge, on antimicrobial resistance than people in lower middle income countries like Nigeria.

00:16:54:24 - 00:17:20:20

Beth

I Friday was telling me, you know, about the, the, the proposer and what they were doing. And, you know, how I could sort of play a very, very, very minor part in this, but working with Doctor Bruno and as it turns out, I met Bruno at a workshop in Mexico in 2018, I think. So actually, we've been able to reconnect on the back of this because I saw he was involved in this project as well.

00:17:20:20 - 00:17:34:23

Beth

So then this is enabled us to kind of continue our discussions there and look how we could do something together. So that networking has kind of come full circle through this particular project as well, which I think is a really nice, quite.

00:17:35:00 - 00:17:43:15

Adam

Beth, do you think there is enough awareness and emphasis on how beneficial international collaboration can be in microbiology?

00:17:43:17 - 00:18:10:24

Beth

I don't have work. And, you know, a drive if I'm not working internationally, you know, at the at the front face of the challenges that I'm trying to, you know, co-create these, solutions for, I think I think it's so important. And I think one of the things that's been most, influential to me in sort of my developing my interest in my career and putting me sort of where I am now is through small workshops that I've been able to attend in the past.

00:18:10:24 - 00:18:40:18

Beth

So these really give you a space to work with people for 3 or 4 days. Come together on one. I share an agenda. You know, I did one, in India that was on antimicrobial resistance, and I did another one also in India on challenges of ocular diseases. And so through these workshops, I've built networks across India combining, you know, infection diagnosis with, cornea losses of microbial keratitis, which is now where my entire fellowship is focused.

00:18:40:18 - 00:19:06:09

Beth

Working with these people that I've built trust and relationships with. The funding is not there at the minute. And I think that's one of the biggest limitations and challenges for early career researchers to actually get the funds and the impetus to be put together to then develop, projects together. And then as you're applying for your own money into moving into your own space, then is the sort of planting the seeds for that to grow.

00:19:06:09 - 00:19:37:09

Beth

And I think that that is something I've seen a lot less of in the last few years, and I think something that hopefully can get addressed somewhere. But I think as well, you know, the online community is so, so important. I mean, this is how, you know, I spent Friday and I met online and we've built this really I think real relationship that's reciprocal as well and is rooted in, you know, not just what you can sort of take from one another, but what we can build together to benefit both of us and the communities more broadly around us.

00:19:37:09 - 00:19:43:22

Beth

So I think that online social spaces as well as is incredibly important.

00:19:43:24 - 00:20:08:19

Akap Friday

I think the entire collaboration is seamlessly so usually at the top level. And I think, a lot of microbiology societies have, a role to play here. We need awareness and even in sort of mentorship programs to bring people together, and also fellowships that can bring people from different countries together. Video opportunities for students, for early career scientists.

00:20:08:19 - 00:20:29:20

Akap Friday

I know some societies do that. But it's also be useful if we can really connect people and connect people together. Just like you also mentioned, social media is also a powerful tool. But one thing I want to stress is that it's also a role to play between the mentor and the, my mum, when we see there's no learning without the learners interest.

00:20:29:22 - 00:20:38:07

Akap Friday

So. Right. You always have to show that interest. Just like I wish you the interest and chill is really interest. Right. So it's a all within.

00:20:38:09 - 00:20:46:21

Adam

Thank you very much. And one last quick fire question starting with you, Akpan Friday. What is next for you both.

00:20:46:23 - 00:21:14:20

Akap Friday

So basically I think I see I and up to that meeting physically. Yeah. And that'll be very soon I just me to be very soon. Because I will be applying for scholarships and I will most likely, follow that path and we'll see very soon. So, I think one of the joys and see someone that, you know, has helped you over time and you've never seen the person physically, so meets with the person, and also career trajectory.

00:21:14:20 - 00:21:29:16

Akap Friday

Right? I would also love to get to the level she wants me to be. In my PhD, just like she has done, and also see her as a professor too. So, I mean, you see massive career advancement here.

00:21:29:19 - 00:21:44:05

Beth

I want to see all of that the Friday I want him to absolutely thrive and succeed and surpass me. And I know and I'm sure that he absolutely will because I know this man quite well. So, yeah, I want everything for him.

00:21:44:07 - 00:21:48:21

Adam

Thank you so much. Both. And, thank you very much for joining us today.

00:21:48:23 - 00:21:50:18

Akap Friday

Thank you so much, Adam.

00:21:50:20 - 00:21:57:08

Adam

Thank you for listening to my crib talk. Don't forget to like and share, and we'll see you in the next episode.