

= Aniru Conteh =

Aniru Sahib Sahib Conteh ( 6 August 1942 ? 4 April 2004 ) was a Sierra Leonean physician and expert on the clinical treatment of Lassa fever , a viral haemorrhagic fever endemic to West Africa caused by the Lassa virus . Conteh studied medicine at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria and taught at Ibadan Teaching Hospital . He later returned to Sierra Leone where he joined the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ( CDC ) Lassa fever program at Nixon Methodist Hospital in Segbwema , first as superintendent and then as clinical director .

After the Sierra Leone Civil War began in 1991 , the CDC closed their program in Segbwema . Conteh and his medical team moved from Segbwema to the Kenema Government Hospital ( KGH ) , where he spent the next two decades running the only dedicated Lassa fever ward in the world . Conteh collaborated with the British charity Merlin to promote public health in Sierra Leone through education and awareness campaigns intended to prevent Lassa fever . With little funding and few supplies , Conteh successfully reduced mortality rates and saved many lives until an accidental needlestick injury led to his own death from the disease in 2004 .

Conteh received renewed public attention in 2009 as the hero of Ross I. Donaldson 's memoir , *The Lassa Ward* .

= = Early life , education , and teaching = =

Aniru Sahib Sahib Conteh was born on 6 August 1942 , in the town of Jawi Folu , Eastern Province , Sierra Leone , the son of a farmer and chief of the village . He moved to Freetown , the capital of Sierra Leone , after his mother died while he was in his teens . Conteh studied chemistry and biology at Fourah Bay College and began teaching after receiving his BSc . In 1968 , he began studying medicine in Nigeria at the modern University of Ibadan , graduating in 1974 . Conteh spent the next four years employed by the Ibadan Teaching Hospital . He returned home to Sierra Leone in 1979 . Conteh married and raised a family with his wife Sarah , producing several sons and daughters .

= = Medical career = =

Conteh spent his professional career working with patients suffering from Lassa fever , a viral haemorrhagic fever endemic to West Africa . Lassa fever was first brought to the attention of the public in 1969 during an outbreak in Nigeria . Identified in 1972 , the disease is known to spread through its host , the Natal multimammate mouse ( *Mastomys natalensis* ) , and infects an estimated 300 @, @ 000 people and results in 5000 deaths annually in Sierra Leone , Liberia , and Guinea . In 1976 , a nosocomial outbreak in the Panguma Catholic Hospital attracted attention in the United States . In response , the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ( CDC ) established research programs in Segbwema , Kenema , and Panguma to study the disease .

= = = Nixon Methodist Hospital = = =

In 1979 , Conteh began working with the CDC and team leader Joseph B. McCormick at the Nixon Methodist Hospital in Segbwema . Conteh became Medical Superintendent of the hospital in 1980 . The Sierra Leone Civil War broke out in 1991 , forcing the CDC to close their program and move to Guinea . The hospital was destroyed in the conflict and the spread of Lassa fever grew worse . During the civil war , the Natal multimammate mouse infested abandoned houses , increasing the likelihood of infection .

= = = Kenema Government Hospital = = =

Conteh now found himself in the middle of a war zone , starving and homeless . He wandered about for several months and finally came to Kenema where he began treating the sick in the midst

of the fighting . Although he had friends overseas , and could have procured a job outside Sierra Leone , he chose to stay and help his people because " they had no one to help them " . Due to the war , most experts familiar with Lassa fever had left the country , and patients suspected of having the disease began to be brought to Conteh for treatment . The Lassa team moved from Segbwema to the Kenema Government Hospital ( KGH ) . In Kenema , Conteh became director of the only Lassa fever isolation ward in the world . Rebels from the Revolutionary United Front took over the town of Kenema in 1997 and 1999 , but Conteh never left his post . It is thought that the rebels spared the hospital from destruction because they were afraid of catching Lassa fever . When the civil war ended in 2002 , the government of Sierra Leone began the process of rebuilding the country .

= = = Contributions to medicine = = =

During the civil war , Conteh was the only clinician in Sierra Leone who had the skills and qualifications to manage patients with Lassa fever . In the absence of the CDC , the Lassa ward was supported by Merlin , a medical relief agency based in the UK . According to Nicholas Mellor , co-founder of Merlin , " Conteh worked with Merlin to get a new laboratory built that would enable collaboration with international research centres with an interest in haemorrhagic diseases . He also worked on training and Lassa fever awareness campaigns . " Conteh 's Lassa fever program " provided the blueprint for many experts " . In 1996 , Daniel Bausch at the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine began working with Conteh and the CDC on research related to Lassa fever .

In 2000 , Conteh coauthored a study published in the Journal of Clinical Microbiology comparing the efficacy and outcome of diagnosing Lassa fever patients with the indirect fluorescent antibody ( IFA ) test and the enzyme linked immunosorbent assay ( ELISA ) . According to Iruka N. Okeke , the study " focused specifically on the development of a diagnostic test for Lassa fever " . In 2001 , Conteh travelled to London , England to attend an international conference on Lassa fever where he presented a paper on managing the disease . Conteh returned to London in September 2003 to receive the " Spirit of Merlin " award for his outstanding role in " saving lives and alleviating suffering " .

= = Death = =

The Lassa ward was short staffed , and Conteh would often draw blood from patients himself . On 17 March 2004 , Conteh was infected with the Lassa virus when he received a needlestick injury while drawing blood from a young pregnant nurse suffering from the disease . The nurse died the next day , and Conteh himself became ill on 23 March . As his condition worsened , he was treated with intravenous ribavirin . Conteh initially survived the critical stage of Lassa fever , but died on 4 April from renal failure ? 18 days after first becoming infected with the Lassa virus . Reporter Sulaiman Momodu described the outpouring of grief in the wake of Conteh 's death :

News of his death spread in Kenema and its environs like a bush fire in the harmattan . Most people were devastated to learn that the only Lassa Fever specialist in Sierra Leone was gone , gone forever . Nurses cried , patients wept . Kenema was thrown into a state of shock and mourning .

Conteh 's funeral was held in the town of Daru .

= = Legacy = =

Conteh 's work in the Lassa ward spanned 25 years and saved thousands of lives . He played a key role in helping Merlin implement a program to support the Lassa ward and fever control measures in Sierra Leone . Because of his skill and dedication , deaths due to cases of suspected Lassa fever declined by 20 % . After Conteh 's death , Merlin and the peacekeepers in the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone ( UNAMSIL ) left Sierra Leone and the Lassa ward in Kenema was barely

functioning . In 2004 , Tulane University , in co @-@ ordination with the World Health Organization , began monitoring Lassa fever patients in Sierra Leone , Liberia , and Guinea through the Mano River Union Lassa Fever Network ( MRU @-@ LFN ) . Today , the Lassa Fever Program is fully operational at Kenema Government Hospital , and focuses on " treatment , containment , prevention and research " .

Conteh was the mentor for UCLA medical professor Ross I. Donaldson in the summer of 2003 , and is the hero of Donaldson 's 2009 memoir , The Lassa Ward .

= = Publications = =

" Lassa Video " . Sierra Leone : Centers for Disease Control and Prevention , Special Pathogens Branch . 1989 . Appearance in documentary film .

Bausch , DG ; Rollin , PE ; Demby , AH ; Coulibaly , M ; Kanu , J ; Conteh , AS ; Wagoner , KD ; McMullan , LK ; et al . ( 2000 ) . " Diagnosis and clinical virology of Lassa fever as evaluated by enzyme @-@ linked immunosorbent assay , indirect fluorescent @-@ antibody test , and virus isolation " . Journal of clinical microbiology 38 ( 7 ) : 2670 ? 7 . PMC 86994 . PMID 10878062 .