Two Scientists at War over Diabetes Cure Claim

Contributed by Tobs Agbaegbu
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Two scientists, both claiming to have discovered the cure for diabetes, take their case to the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC

The federal government has commenced full investigation, through the Federal Ministry of Health and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, EFCC, into an alleged false claim by Louis Nelson, a Nigerian scientist, alleged to have discovered cure for diabetes in 2009. The ministry of health was directed, through a letter from the Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation, dated April 20, 2011, and signed by Y.E. Dominic, to take “necessary action” on a petition sent to President Goodluck Jonathan by Nwobilo Nwankwo, an Aba-based herbal researcher who claims to be the real owner of the diabetes cure herb attributed to Nelson. The ministry has already commenced its investigation as directed. The EFCC, an anti-graft agency of the federal government, also started investigating two aspects of the petition. While an aspect of the petition deals with an allegation by Nwankwo that Nelson dubiously collected the sum of $100million from a US firm, as a result of the false claim, the second is on the allegation that top level officials of both the National Institute for Pharmaceutical Research and Development, NIPRD, and the Federal Ministry of Health conspired to conceal the truth about what really happened. Nwankwo told Newswatch in Abuja that the EFCC has, indeed, interviewed him on issues he raised in his petition. He said he did not only own up the petition but also revealed to the agency, the role played by some staff of both the Federal Ministry of Health and NIPRD in Abuja to block the course of investigations, to favour Nelson. He said he gave the EFCC operatives the names of the officials involved and the roles they played. The EFCC investigation is being co-ordinated by two officers, Femi George and another simply identified as Ariyo. Both operatives are in the EFCC headquarters in Abuja. Ariyo refused to disclose his full identity when Newswatch reached him on his mobile phone last week but rather confirmed to the magazine that investigations have actually reached advanced stage on the matter. The ongoing investigations are said to have been gingered by a feeling by President Jonathan that he may have been misled into giving credit for the medical breakthrough to a wrong person, when he spoke about the achievement, during his national Golden Jubilee anniversary broadcast in October, last year. It was while the president was chronicling the many achievements of Nigeria during the broadcast, that he also announced with joy and national pride, that “Dr. Louis Nelson discovered a permanent cure for diabetes.’’ Newswatch learnt that Jonathan was convinced on the need to speak glowingly about the medical feat by officials of the Ministry of Health, after he was presented with a juicy and compelling story of Nelson and his alleged discovery. Among others, the president was said to have been told that the discovery was the product of a research made by Nelson, a graduate of Chemistry from the University of Ibadan, with the aid of a grant from America. His research findings were said to have stipulated, among others things, the quantity of the drug which could be tolerated in the human body. Before it was made public, the drug was said to have been subjected to two clinical trials, one of which was at the University of Jos University Teaching Hospital, JUTH. Both trials were said to have been highly successful, showing high potency for the cure of the dreaded, sixth largest killer disease in Nigeria. Nelson was said to have also applied and was given a US patent for the drug. A doctorate degree holder in Molecular and Computational Chemistry from the University of Ibadan, Nelson is a native of Nsit Ubium local government area of Akwa Ibom State. His record of public service showed that he served as permanent secretary in the Ministry of Science and Technology in 2001. A year before the president made the official pronouncement, news of the alleged breakthrough had also filtered into the media and even made front page news in a Lagos-based daily. This was followed by a highly publicised event in April 2009, where Nelson signed an agreement in Abuja with GDPAU, a firm from New Brunswick, New Jersey, USA, for the commercialisation of his anti- diabetes drug, in collaboration with NIPRD. Aliyu Idi Hong, then minister of state for health, who witnessed the agreement signing ceremony, described the development as “epoch and historical,” pointing out that the drug would contribute to the quality of health care all over the world and boost the economy of the country. Hong said the drug would expand the landscape of medicare in the world and encourage more researches into herbal drugs in the country. “I believe that there are so many of such leaves in the bush in Nigeria that can cure many of these diseases that are proving difficult in the world. This is an epoch and historical day in the history of this country,” he said. The then minister of state for health also noted that diabetes had posed a serious health challenge worldwide, and is the sixth largest killer in Nigeria. “There is hardly a house you go to in Nigeria now that one person will not be affected by this killer disease,” he said. He pledged the support of the federal government to the efforts of research institutes, especially those that were into herbal medicine research. Ramesh Pandey, representative of GDPAU, at the occasion, described the drug as one of the greatest things that will come out of the continent. While explaining that the achievement would go a long way in helping to launder the image of the country, Pandey commended the efforts of Nigerian researchers, and described them as one of the best in the world. But in his petition to the President dated October 7, 2010, Nwankwo debunked the story about the reported accomplishment by Nelson. “With humility sir, may I state that the information passed to you is misleading .Dr. Louis Nelson, did not discover any cure for diabetes in Nigeria. The discovery was made by Nwobilo Nwankwo,” he said. He told the President that he alerted Tunde Oshotimehin, the then minister of health, about the false claim, when it was first announced by NIPRD. He said also that he alerted many agencies of government about a conspiracy between Nelson and officials of NIPRD to deny him credit for his work, but that his voice was drowned by the weight of high powered conspiracy against him. In the petition, he chronicled how he came about the drug and how he was cheated out by officials of NIPRD. He traced the genesis of the discovery he made to a spiritual revelation he had about 23 years ago when a strange fellow appeared to him in a dream, where he was informed that something hidden will be revealed to

him. Nwankwo said the revelation only materialised in 2004 when the name of a herb he claims is now the solution to diabetes was revealed to him. He gave the Igbo name of the herb as Ahaaba plant, and its botanical name as Cusonia Arborea. He described the herb as “efficacious in the treatment and or cure for tooth and tooth related ailments, tuberculosis and diabetes.” Nwankwo said his trouble started in February 2007, when he took details of the herb to NIPRD for possible research and development and was later told by one Joseph Okogun, a professor of medicine who was assigned to handle his case, that there was activity in the herb but that they needed time to make other confirmations about its efficacy. He said the confirmation came in May 2008, at a meeting he had with Okogun in the presence of Kolo Ibrahim, another staff of NIPRD. “I was officially informed that after initial research carried out on the herb, my claim on the efficacy of the herb was proved right and that further to this, the herb would be used to produce a medicine in liquid form for tooth ache, a mouth wash and a herbal tooth paste,” he said. In addition, he said NIPRD made a promise for three things. First, that after the research, the discovery would be published in an international science journal in his name. The second was that it would be patented in his name while the third promise was that a manufacturer would be found to produce the drug in his name. On the basis of what he discussed with the organisation, he said he was later asked by Ufot Inyang, then director-general of NIPRD, to produce a Memorandum of Understanding, MoU, for study and possible signing. He said he complied, through his lawyers. Even after he met all their requirements, Nwankwo said he was shocked to receive a letter from NIPRD in March 2009, informing him that the organisation was no longer interested in signing the MoU and going ahead with his work. He said they claimed in the letter that they suddenly discovered that someone else from Zaria had earlier brought the same herb to them. Subsequently, he said, NIPRD requested him to submit his bill for transport expenses incurred in the course of his movement from Aba in Abia State, for meetings with the organisation in Abuja. Out of a total sum of N540, 000 which he said he submitted, he was offered N40, 000 which he described as a laughable amount. “If NIPRD will be allowed to treat a citizen of Nigeria this way, the government’s laudable objective of making Nigeria the world leader of herb based drug will only end up as a mere dream,” he said. The office of minister of health intervened by demanding an explanation from the NIPRD. on the subject. In a four-page reply made by Karniyus Gamaniel, acting director-general of NIPRD, he acknowledged that NIPRD had dealings with Nwankwo after he submitted herbal sample for investigation. “Yes, the sample showed weak activity, but this was a preliminary qualitative test that was done to show evidence of drug effect and to enable registration and further activity.” He also responded to the allegation that some officials of NIPRD conspired against Nwankwo by inviting Nelson to lay claim to the herb. “Interaction between NIPRD and Dr. Nelson predates the arrival of Nwankwo in 2007, and there are documents to prove this. There is no commonality between Dr. Nelson’s Vernonia amygdalina and Nwankwo’s Cussonia barteri as far as NIPRID records are concerned. Furthermore, there is an existing MoU between Dr. Nelson and NIPRD with dates to show for it.” Gamaniel confirmed also that Nelson got a US patent for his drug. “The product referenced: United States Patent (Nelson) US 6,531,461 B1) patented in US by Dr. Nelson since 2003 couldn’t have been related to Nwankwo’s product that came in 2007," he told the minister of health. By press time last week, the outcome of the two investigations authorised by President Jonathan on the controversy over the discovery of cure for diabetes was yet to be made public. Nelson could not be reached for comments by Newswatch. Nwankwo said he was eagerly awaiting the outcome of the investigations. “It is only when I see how fair the investigation reports are, that I will know what next step to take,” Nwankwo told Newswatch in Abuja last week. Lagos NUJ Elects New Exco Omoyeme Abumere The Lagos Council of the Nigerian Union of Journalists, NUJ, recently elected new executives to pilot the affairs of the body in the next three years. While most of the new executives were returned unopposed, but there was a keen contest for the position of vice chairman. The officials of the union who were elected unopposed are Deji Gbolahan Elumoye, chairman; Sylva Emeka Okereke, secretary; Eyitayo Ladi-Arowa, assistant secretary; Kehinde Ajayi, treasurer; Ayodele Ilori, financial secretary and Idowu Ogunleye, internal auditor. In the contest for the post of vice chairman, Jimoh Babatunde of Vanguard newspapers won with 253 votes defeating Qasim Adereti of Voice of Nigeria, VON, who had 111 votes. Mohammed Garuba, national president of the union, who swore in the newly elected executives, was glad that the exercise went on smoothly. He described the Lagos Council of NUJ as the most vibrant chapter in Nigeria and urged the new executive to urgently deal with pressing issues in the union such as the non- payment of salaries of members working in media houses In his acceptance speech, Elumoye, the new chairman, thanked members of the union for their support and promised that the executive would live up to the expectations of members. He also assured members that he would work with the other officials in executing projects, especially the housing scheme for journalists in Lagos State.