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MSU's Birbeck wins outreach award for work on epilepsy in Zambia

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EAST LANSING, Mich. — Gretchen Birbeck, director of MSU's International Neurologic and Psychiatric Epidemiology Program, has been selected as a regional winner of the 2011 Outreach Scholarship/W.K. Kellogg Foundation Engagement Award for her work with epilepsy in Zambia.

Birbeck – who has been studying in Zambia and sub-Saharan Africa since the early 1990s, focusing in part on the link between epilepsy and cerebral malaria – led one of four community outreach initiatives honored by Association of Public and Land-grant Universities.

In addition to being honored at the 12th annual National Outreach Scholarship Conference hosted by Michigan State University in October, Birbeck will receive a \$5,000 prize and qualifies to compete for the APLU's annual C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award.

The other regional award winners come from Montana State University, Pennsylvania State University and the University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

"Engagement with society is one of the three pillars in the mission of public research universities, along with education and research," said APLU President Peter McPherson. "These projects exemplify the outstanding quality and range of outreach and engagement activities of the nation's public universities. We salute each of these model programs, which feature students, faculty and administrators working to improve the quality of life for all."

Birbeck, also an associate professor of neurology and ophthalmology in MSU's College of Osteopathic Medicine, has worked on many research projects dealing with epilepsy in Zambia, most recently:

- [Looking to uncover the risks of treating epileptic seizures in HIV-positive patients](#), providing much-needed data on possible interactions between antiepileptic drugs and antiretroviral medicines that potentially could make HIV drugs less effective or the disease itself drug resistant.
- [In research published in Lancet Neurology](#), Birbeck led a team that found almost a third of cerebral malaria survivors developed epilepsy or other behavioral disorders in the most comprehensive study to date of the disease in African children. The findings solidified the link between malaria and neuropsychiatric disorders that affect hundreds of thousands of children.
- [Led a study that found nearly 50 percent](#) of pharmacies in Zambia do not carry antiepileptic drugs, seriously hampering efforts to tackle one of the most cost-effective chronic conditions to treat.

In March 2010, the MSU-Zambia collaboration was declared to be "a global success story" by the U.S. National Institute of Health's Fogarty International Center. Birbeck, who also holds an appointment in MSU's Department of Epidemiology, has appeared in more than 60 publications related to her research. In the past decade, she has been awarded more than \$2 million for research and capacity building in sub-Saharan Africa.

Established in 2006, the APLU'S Outreach Scholarship and Magrath University Community Engagement Awards recognize four-year public universities that have redesigned their learning, discovery and engagement functions to become more closely and productively involved with their communities.

The C. Peter Magrath University Community Engagement Award, made possible by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, includes \$20,000 and a sculpture. The award – named for C. Peter Magrath, APLU's president from 1992-2005 – will be announced during the APLU annual meeting in November in San Francisco.

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Gretchen Birbeck, associate professor of neurology and ophthalmology

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