Emeritus Professor of Civil Engineering, University of Sierra Leone, Kosonike Koso-Thomas, has in The Founding Of A Medical College: Overcoming Obstacles to Academic Development in Sierra Leone (hereafter called The Founding Of A Medical College) written an authoritative book tracing the background to the establishment of a medical institution in the University of Sierra Leone during his tenure as Vice-Chancellor from 1984-93. Prof. Koso-Thomas gives an elucidating background of education in developing countries gradually zeroing in on the Sierra Leonean scene from pre-independence in a lucid style detailing key characteristics of crucial institutions and personalities there. His experience as a member of the International Editorial Board of McGraw Hill Book Co, UNESCO Advisory Committee on Higher Education in Africa and as chairman of the Tertiary Education Commission and the National Science and Technological Council of Sierra Leone has armed him with much facility in garnering, tailoring and packaging relevant information at the appropriate points. The book is amply illustrated with eleven black and white as well as glossy coloured pictures.

The Founding Of A Medical College contains the author’s bio-data, a foreword by a past Provost of the College of Medicine, a preface and an introduction both written by the author. These short sections set the scene for the body of the work. In his one and a half page foreword Dr. Mbaimba Baryoh sums up the protracted struggle which preceded the creation of the medical college, including the intervention of Prof. Koso-Thomas who had just been appointed Vice Chancellor of the University of Sierra Leone.

Dr. Baryoh paints a clear picture of the scenario confronting Prof. Koso-Thomas from the outset of his intervention – fear of change. His proposal of establishing a faculty of medicine at a traditional liberal arts college got some faculty staff against him, as they felt threatened that it would stifle the growth of existing faculties. But Prof. Koso-Thomas could not be deterred. In the end he got more than a faculty of medicine; he got a college of medicine.

The author in his preface writes that The Founding Of A Medical College is a response to requests from his friends to detail the story behind some of his landmark achievements as Vice-Chancellor. He picks up the theme of change initiated by Dr. Baryoh. He states that many of his ideas on management and university development offended critics of change. Some, those created to promote income generation and cost-effectiveness, were discarded after his departure. He concedes, however, that today they are being more favourably viewed. Income generation linked with institutional growth and development of new programmes has enabled some arms of the university to expand and provide quality education to students.
Acknowledgements, eight and a half pages of notes and up to fifty-six references as well as three and a half page index constitute the closing contents. This well-written work effectively documents the hurdles involved in conceiving and generating support for such an essential project development as medical training. In simple language, the author takes stock of the progress and setbacks he faced as he pioneered the founding of our first medical and health institution of higher education. Dark tales of intrigue, treachery and malevolence run through this account. It is an indispensable lesson in university administration in the third world, specifically showing how Koso-Thomas nursed several higher education projects to fruition.

The early intervention of the Regional Office of the World Health Organization (WHO)—whose director, Prof. Monekosso acted on the plea of Dr. Moira Browne at a conference in Brazzaville, Congo—aided the Medical Faculty Project. This and the presence of Prof. T.A.I. Grillo, on sabbatical leave from Obafemi Awolowo University, were happy coincidences. Prof. Grillo had held key positions in international health bodies and had previously been consulted by Dr. Olu Williams, then Head of Clinical Studies, Connaught Hospital, in Freetown on training medical doctors in Sierra Leone. This coincidental meeting led to Grilllo’s assignment to Sierra Leone to help set up a medical college.

In his seven-page introduction, the author discusses medical education in Sierra Leone starting from the emergence of education as the vehicle for African enlightenment and prosperity even in the face of misgivings about its probable impact on tradition and culture. Medical education was the slowest to gain acceptance as the means to propel the country into a healthful future.

How could a country whose natural beauty and mineral wealth attracted European explorers to its shores allow the blight of being called a poor and underdeveloped country in the “Dark Continent,” the author wonders. A key paradox in the book is that Sierra Leone, a country which embraced education early in its history found it a problem to institute measures to facilitate medical education. Following a demographic and geographical description of Sierra Leone, the author deftly paints a picture of the dire situation of the health sector. The capital city and the main provincial towns were served by well trained but limited medical personnel whilst the rest of the country made do with traditional medicine. He demonstrates how the weather, climate and vegetation exert pressures on health facilities in various parts of the country with the Northern Province in the savannah belt enjoying moderately cool temperature and thus less health pressures.

He goes on to enumerate the vast mineral and marine riches of the country. He reprises the demographic profile of the country and ties it with his argument that it is only through improved education, health and infrastructure that all sixteen ethnic groups will come to reap the benefits of Sierra Leone’s resources.

Prof. Koso-Thomas then surveys the Sierra Leone educational system since colonial times when Freetown was the first city in West Africa to be exposed to higher western education. He then tries to fit medical education within the framework of university admission requirements. Before 1985, no provision existed for local medical education; doctors were only trained overseas mostly at parents’ expense. Those not too lucky or financially equipped to acquire a medical education read for the Bachelor of Arts degree. Some more fortunate gained admission to the medical faculty of Durham University. A general picture of the slow and ineffective process of training doctors even when the country had much need of them is clearly evident. On attaining independence, however, government started training health personnel in all key and crucial areas overseas. Even with all its efforts
the huge demands on the health-care system could not be met. Various incentives offered failed to produce desirable effects. The dire situation in the health sector was by 1980 reflected in a very high mortality rate for children under five and a maternal mortality ratio far higher than those of other English-speaking countries.

The need for local training of much of our manpower in the medical field was growing faster. Various attempts were made to address this through establishing a faculty of medicine at Fourah Bay College. None attained political acceptability because of questions of cost-effectiveness and investment priority. Koso-Thomas was familiar with some of these as they were being widely discussed on campus. So he was very receptive to the idea when approached by a group of eminent doctors proposing that a new attempt be made. But, according to the author, each step taken was obstructed by intrigue and malicious misinformation.

The Founding of a Medical College comprises eight chapters that develop the concerns of the work. The story of the founding of the medical college in Sierra Leone is told sequentially in narrative form interspersed with stretches of analytical prose. A clear portrait of each of the key players in the medical college saga emerges. The first chapter, “Launching the Idea,” focuses on a meeting with the principal, Prof. Eldred Jones, where he discusses the idea proposed to him by the core group of medicos pioneering the effort. He follows this up with well-tailored profiles of the Principal and a predecessor, Dr. Davidson Nicol, and the core medicos together with diagnoses of their knowledge, interest and level and extent of involvement in the effort. He also crystallizes their frustration over the seemingly stalled efforts over the years to fulfil the goal.

The second chapter, “Lessons from Earlier Failures” looks back on four attempts to create a medical institution. It goes on to explain why those attempts failed, including flawed submissions of foreign consultants who mostly had no feel for local conditions and did little consultation with the stakeholders and the government.

The third chapter, “Planning Processes and Setbacks,” follows the delicate process of fitting the medical institution to three other related institutions already established through a 1974 Education review. This started with the setting up of an Ad-Hoc Committee on Medical Education with four key medical personnel who engaged six months in deliberations, curriculum studies, consultations, interviews and local and overseas visits.

In the fourth chapter, “Overcoming the Hurdles,” the author narrates how the project developed momentum over time, with the ad hoc committee at the centre receiving reports of the meetings with the government as well as its exploration for avenues of support for staff recruitment and finance for the project.

The fifth chapter, “A Critical Intervention that Saved the Medical Faculty Project,” shows how the then Second Vice President stepped in to reconcile the warring parties and save the project whose lynchpin, Prof. Grillo, was suddenly recalled home. To reverse this, a high powered government delegation headed by the Second Vice President had audience with the then Nigerian President, General Babangida, and presented him with a note verbale from his Sierra Leonean counterpart. The strong bond between the Sierra Leone President, Major General Momoh and the Nigerian Head of State restored the project, with Prof Grillo returning to resume work in Freetown after taking the delegation on a tour of selected medical institutions in Nigeria.

The other very interesting chapter is the sixth, “Other Development Initiatives and Their Impact on the Medical Faculty Project.” In this chapter the author outlines the need for
the University of Sierra Leone to develop income-generating and cost-saving measures as well as research wings, steps other universities had taken to adapt their programmes to changing economic realities.

I expected the seventh chapter titled “Launching the Medical College” to feature the launching ceremony. Instead, it catalogues the administrative steps that led to its final founding. The eighth and last chapter,” The College At Present – Its Program And Prospects,” reads much like a college report listing courses offered and qualifications to be earned in taking the various designated courses.

I have found The Founding Of A Medical College very interesting and educative and would therefore recommend it highly to the general reader and particularly to medical and nursing personnel, students, educators, and university administrators. It breaks new ground as the first such work of a coordinator of a project he nursed into being.