Dr. Noah Dessalegn, a medical doctor from Ethiopia, is currently finishing the Humphrey Fellowship at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University. Named after former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, the fellowship brings young and mid-career professionals from designated countries to the United States for one year of graduate level study, and is funded through the U.S. Department of State.

Dr. Dessalegn grew up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and completed his medical training in Jimma, a city in south-western Ethiopia. After becoming a doctor, he worked at a hospital run partly by Norwegian Christian missionaries in rural Ethiopia, as well as at Myungsu Christian Medical Center in Addis Ababa. According to Dr. Dessalegn, there were many patients needing reconstructive surgery as a result of burns and traffic accidents. However, he also noted seeing a shift to more diagnoses of chronic non-communicable diseases at the hospitals in which he worked.

“The more I spent my career in public service, and got exposed to hurt people, the more I wanted to help myself help others. Therefore, I started looking for opportunities to study in a postgraduate program,” Dr. Dessalegn explained.

He completed a dual master’s degree in medicine and philosophy at the University of Sydney in Australia, where he researched HIV preventive health care in Ethiopia. In this research, which was supervised at the University of Sydney, Dr. Dessalegn focused on disclosure of HIV status, including comparing the rate of disclosure in Ethiopia to other African countries. He found that most people disclose their HIV status to their partners, families, or others, but often after having unprotected sex. In looking specifically at disclosure to religious leaders, Dr. Dessalegn found that only 5% of HIV infected individuals disclosed their status, though nearly 100% of them reported as belonging to a religious denomination. “We need to engage religious leaders by clearing their doubts and earning their trust through respectful discussion and careful explanation of the enormous role they could play in the country’s HIV prevention response,” he explained.

Dr. Dessalegn’s HIV research experience during his dual master’s degree program led him directly into applying for the Humphrey Fellowship at Emory. Having worked as a medical director for a public hospital, healthcare management committee member, leader for surgery and maternity case-teams at Ethiopian hospitals, and mentor to medical
students in Ethiopia, he was excited to develop a public health research experience at Emory. “I have always wanted to combine clinical medicine, public health, and research in my career. The Humphrey Fellowship selects applicants based on their academic background, leadership potential, and commitment to public service – [these are] areas I am passionate about,” he said.

Dr. Dessalegn has described his experience at Emory as “surreal,” because of the courses, seminars, webinars, workshops, and trainings in which he has participated through the Humphrey Fellowship. “I have taken courses that will prepare me for a career in medical research, such as Statistical Software Programming,” Dr. Dessalegn said. The Humphrey Fellowship program also emphasizes community service, and fellows participate in volunteer opportunities.

Dr. Dessalegn discussed his experiences volunteering at the Jerusalem House, the largest provider of permanent housing for Atlanta’s low-income and homeless individuals and families affected by HIV/AIDS, as well as Habitat for Humanity, which builds homes for low-income individuals. Dr. Dessalegn also had the opportunity to do site visits at several international public health organizations, including CARE and the Georgia Department of Public Health. Aside from these opportunities, Dr. Dessalegn felt that sitting “in a global classroom studying, working, and networking with some of the best minds from all over the globe” was one of the best experiences of the Humphrey Fellowship at Emory. Dr. Dessalegn is currently in Puerto Rico completing an internship with the CDC for the final portion of his fellowship. In Puerto Rico, he is working on a study looking at persistent Zika virus infection and its sexual transmission. This internship will allow Dr. Dessalegn to further build on his public health research skills that he gained through his experience at Emory.

While completing his Humphrey Fellowship, Dr. Dessalegn has maintained a connection to Ethiopia by completing informational interviews with the Child Health and Mortality Prevention Surveillance (CHAMPS) Network project at the Emory Global Health Institute. He also has continued to work on his manuscript for publication of the HIV study that he worked on while at the University of Sydney. Studying at Emory has allowed him to continue developing his expertise in medical research in Ethiopia.

Once his fellowship is completed, Dr. Dessalegn hopes to continue studying in a clinical training program, where he will be able to gain more expertise in clinical medicine and research. “I am passionate about social justice in health and education. The bad governance, blatant human rights violations, ethnic division, and ensuing ‘health gap’ in my country worries me a lot,” he said. In the future, Dr. Dessalegn said he also wants to increase his involvement in politics at the community level to fight for justice in healthcare and education. He hopes to do community organizing through his church, in which he is an active member. The Humphrey Fellowship at Emory has been an influential experience for Dr. Dessalegn, and he will be able to use his experience to add a great deal of value to public health research in Ethiopia.

“Most importantly, I have sat in a global classroom studying, working, and networking with some of the best minds from all over the globe.”
– Dr. Noah Dessalegn, Humphrey Fellow