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# Bridge2Aid: lending a helping hand in Tanzania

*In June 2006, Newcastle dentist Kathy Wilson flew 4,500 miles to Tanzania to work as a locum for Bridge2Aid – a UK charity working in the North West of the country. Here she tells the story of a life-changing two weeks and one of the most rewarding parts of her career.*

Bridge2Aid operates dental and community development programmes in North West Tanzania. As part of the dental programme they operate a dental clinic in Mwanza, Hope Dental Centre, which donates all of its profits to the charity, provides free and subsidised dental treatment to those in need and also offers dental training facilities. Hope Dental Centre operates commercially, charging fees to patients. This charging structure funds the resident dentist's salary and the regular running costs and also generates a profit which is vital to the charitable work of Bridge2Aid in Mwanza.

Bridge2Aid has used some of these profits to provide free pain relieving treatment for well over 1,500 people in several rural areas over the past 18 months, through the UK Dental Volunteer Programme (DVP). In partnership with the regional government, an eight-day intensive training course in urgent dental treatment for Rural Clinical Officers (RCO) has been developed. In order to be able to carry out this valuable work, Bridge2Aid operate three programmes for dental volunteers (dentists and nurses), who help to provide the training. Dr Ian Wilson, Dental Director, manages the volunteers during their two week visit. This leaves Hope Dental Centre to be run by a locum dentist and in June of 2006 this was to be my role, one which proved to be one of the most rewarding two weeks of my career.

Arriving in Mwanza, I was met by Ian and Andie Wilson and instantly made to feel at home. In the morning Ian and I had an early start to fly to one of the local gold mines, where we carried out a routine clinic for the workers at the site. The partnership with the mining companies is also allowing Bridge2Aid to develop basic dental services with some very poor and remote communities. The day at the mine was an experience in itself



– flying to work in a 10-seater plane certainly beats rush hour traffic! The medical centre at the site is a fully equipped dental surgery where a range of treatments can be undertaken and there was no shortage of patients. At the end of the day, after being fully searched for any hidden bullion, we returned to Mwanza tired but exhilarated.

The following day I joined Ian at Hope Dental Clinic to receive an orientation and learn about the management of the unit, and within the first hour I was getting down to business.

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Kathy in Tanzania, in the surgery, on location and relaxing with fellow vounteers at the end of long but satisfying days

My command of Swahili was limited to 'Hello' and 'Goodbye', but nursing staff Catherine and Joyce helped with translation and guided me through the day, whilst Assed, the dental receptionist, kept me on track with the admin side of things. All three were such a fantastic support and are a credit to the organisation; friendly, welcoming, enthusiastic and keen to work as a team, I would have been lost without them.

Now truly installed as the resident locum for two weeks, I was kept busy carrying out routine dental treatment for a range of patients, including local people, mine workers who had travelled into town, expatriates, foreign students on electives and holiday makers. At the end of each day I met with

the other volunteers, Ian, and Jo Topley (Training and Social Care Director) for a debrief and an opportunity to share our experiences of the day. When asked how things had gone, my response repeatedly was *"Everything is just grand!"*, as indeed it was. In the evenings all the volunteers took the opportunity to meet up for dinner, to socialise and reflect on the day. We tried many of the local restaurants, enjoyed sunsets over Lake Victoria and sampled many Tanzanian delicacies.

I was very lucky to be able to spend an afternoon with the DVP programme to get a flavour of the other side of the volunteer coin. The setting was a rural healthcare clinic, with a queue of 100 patients, RCOs eager for training and an enthu-

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siastic, hard working team of dentists and nurses. Arriving at the site, I was immediately given a pair of forceps and thrown in. Once again it was *"just grand!"* – such a rewarding experience, passing on skills to local people and at the same time helping local people obtain urgent dental care.

After the first week we all took a welcome rest on safari in the Serengeti, an absolute must with fantastic landscapes, an abundance of wildlife, beautiful sunrises and great people. The second week was spent back at Hope Clinic getting on with the job and enjoying every minute of it!

All in all I had a wonderful time in Mwanza and the experience of working with the Bridge2Aid team has been inspiring, so much so that I am already making plans to return in January to allow Ian, Andie and their children to have a well earned break back in the UK. My experience as a locum at Hope Dental Clinic is easily summed up in one sentence:

*'It was just grand!'*

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Happy members of the Hope Dental Clinic team