PERSONAL ACCOUNT

'A truly rewarding and humbling experience'

Matthew Chung, a dentist from Liverpool, provides an account of his experience volunteering with Mercy Ships in Dakar, Senegal.

Fig. 1 Africa Mercy

In October 2019, I had the fantastic opportunity to volunteer for two weeks with Mercy Ships in Dakar, Senegal. This is an international Christian charity which operates the largest non-governmental hospital ship in the world, the Africa Mercy (Fig. 1).

For each mission, the ship docks in a country on the west coast of Africa for ten months providing free healthcare and sustainable training for local healthcare workers and the community.

The ship accommodates up to 450 volunteer crew members from around the world and contains modern facilities including five theatres, labs, intensive care unit and recovery beds for 82 patients. These

help to support specialities which include oral and maxillofacial surgery, plastics, orthopaedics, ophthalmology, general surgery and women's health. Remarkably, there is also an academy which provides education from preschool to high school for the children of long-term volunteers.

Senegal ranks 166 on the United Nation's Human Development Index. Over 93% of the population do not have access to safe, affordable surgery. Malaria, high child mortality rate and widespread poverty are some of the challenges faced by the 14 million residents.¹ According to World Health Organisation 2016 data, there are 0.079 dentists per 10,000 population, which is

less than the recommended 1 per 10,000.²

Typically, the dental team would live on the ship and travel to an external clinic. This was the first mission where the dental living quarters were based off ship to offset the travel time to the dental clinic in Sangalkam. The working week was Monday to Friday with patient screening operating on Monday and Wednesday morning before an 8.30 am clinic start. Hundreds of people would travel from local and distant communities. Priority was given to children and those with pain or facial swellings. Unfortunately, not everyone could be seen in the same week and these patients would have to return for rescreening. Despite this, all patients were very

Fig. 2 Dental team

« understanding and appreciative of the running of the clinic.

Approximately 50 patients were seen between three dentists, one hygienist, five dental nurses and day crew (Fig. 2). The day crew were vibrant Senegalese volunteers with no prior dental experience who were recruited to assist with translation, nursing and provision of oral health education.

The capacity of the ship meant all the equipment necessary for the provision of a range of high-quality dentistry could be provided. This included reclining chairs, handpieces, endodontic kits and gold standard decontamination units.

The majority of treatment was dentoalveolar surgery, which provided a fantastic opportunity to develop oral surgery skills, especially with the frequent long roots and dense bone!

There was also flexibility to divide treatment based on preference and skill set, and support was always on hand for the less experienced. Working amongst frequent power cuts made for a unique experience, to which the day crew would amusingly

Fig. 3 Gingival and mucosal tattoo

without fail respond with 'this is Africa'.

During my trip I came across an intriguing and unique presentation (Fig. 3). Some women adopt the painful custom of gingival and mucosal tattoos inherited from their ancestors. This is believed to promote attractiveness, boost dental health and eliminate bad breath. Needles are used to inject the soft tissues with dark powder made from burnt oil and shea butter.

Weekends offered the opportunity to relax, explore local attractions and to socialise with crew members onboard the ship.

This was my first dental volunteering trip abroad and naturally I had some trepidation with the uncertainty of what was to be expected. This was a truly rewarding and humbling experience and interacting with the local people and volunteers from around the world was my highlight. I gained invaluable life and clinical experience and made life-long friends. I highly recommend everyone reading this to consider volunteering for this extremely organised and well-run organisation.

Future trips will be in Liberia for 2020-2021 and Sierra Leone in 2021-2022. Also, to look out for is the Global Mercy, a new ship planning to be deployed in 2020 with double the surgical capacity and patient beds. ■

References

1. United Nations Development Programme Human Development Reports 2019. Available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/SEN> (accessed January 2020).
2. World Health Organisation Observatory Data Repository. Dentistry Personnel. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.main.HWF2> (accessed January 2020).