

Malawi – More than an elective

As part of her medical training, Nikole Fry decided to volunteer at Beit Cure Hospital in Blantyre, Malawi, to experience a very different side of medicine.

This year as part of my medical electives I had the opportunity to visit one of the poorest countries in Africa – Malawi. Having never been to a third world country before, first impressions were, needless to say, a bit of a shock!

The flight from Johannesburg to Blantyre was a bit of a 'nail-biter'. At first I thought the passengers may need to get out and give the little plane a push to get started! After a bumpy arrival at Blantyre, I looked around to see what an international airport in Malawi looks like: a shed in the middle of a desert paddock. I was greeted by a hospital employee named Innocent and taken to the hospital and guesthouse that would be my home for the next five weeks.

Awaking the next morning I decided to explore this small town. Instantly I realised how much I stuck out from the crowd. I was the only Caucasian amid a sea of African people. I found a small convenience store to buy some supplies and felt a little nervous by the beggars outside.

The next day was the start of work. I was at the Beit Cure International Hospital, a charity-funded paediatric orthopaedic hospital run mostly by British surgeons volunteering their time and services. The hospital was small but tidy, filled with children who loved having us visit each day. I will never forget their beautiful big smiles welcoming us each morning.

The cases we saw were things I had never imagined. Angular limb deformities, chronic osteomyelitis, osteogenesis imperfecta, the list goes on. Although many of these conditions are also seen in developed countries, these children may not be diagnosed or treated until their late teens, which makes the problem all that harder to manage.

Beit Cure has a fantastic club foot program that also involves allied health in the management of these children. The outcomes from this program have been very positive, and the dedication shown by the staff is nothing short of spectacular.

As you can imagine, transport is an issue with hardly anyone owning a car, plus the price and availability of fuel is ridiculous. So many of the staff at the hospital would drive several hours in their own time to pick up children from distant villages to bring them to hospital for treatment.

Funding is very tight for Beit Cure, so they have developed an ingenious way of helping supplement their costs. They have built a private wing where adult private patients can pay for and receive orthopaedic treatment. The money paid from these private patients helps pay for the treatment of the children, so all their healthcare is free. Thanks to generous donations, I was able to contribute towards the surgery of a child with chronic osteomyelitis, which gave me the best feeling in the world.

After five weeks working in Malawi, my perceptions of this beautiful country began to change. Although I still saw the poverty, I also saw the kindness and happiness in the local people. Their ability to be thankful and truly grateful for what little they had made a lasting impression on me. I fell in love with the children: they were always laughing and playing, even though their toys were only what they could find on the street. A popular one was the empty water bottle as a football.

I still despaired for their horrific healthcare situation, but it made me more determined to return and make a real difference to this country. There is so much that can be done for the people of Malawi, and any help they can get is truly appreciated.

I hope I can inspire more medical students to visit Malawi. It's more than an elective; it's a life-changing experience you will never forget. **Q**



The AMAQ Foundation provided Nikole with a \$300 donation to the Beit Cure Hospital towards the provision of medicine and health services to their patients. The Foundation also sent two copies of Dr Chris Schull's *Common Medical Problems in the Tropics*, a textbook designed for health workers in developing countries.

If you are headed to a developing country that could use the textbook, please contact Neil Mackintosh on (07) 3872 2267 or email neil.mackintosh@amaq.com.au