

January 2010

Habari! It has been almost three weeks since I arrived in Tanzania. As most of you would have heard, my journey from Changi Airport to Kilimanjaro International Airport (KIA) took close to 48 hours! It was such an ordeal and I was extremely worried because of all the transfers and changes, that my luggage would get misplaced along the way. But thank God, I arrived at KIA in one piece, with none of my luggage missing.

It has been a blessed adventure so far! I have met amazingly generous and inspiring people, and experienced surprising and wonderful things. Just the ride down to town in the local bus (*dala dala*) is a story in itself!

Kibosho Hospital

The hospital I am volunteering at is a 100-bed district hospital called Kibosho Hospital. They currently have one doctor/surgeon here, and about 10 medical assistants (MA) and assistant medical officers (AMO). The MA and AMO see and treat patients, but their knowledge and skills are extremely limited.

Kibosho is about 15km from Moshi town, and 1400 metres above sea level. The weather

is cool, and the air is crisp! PLUS, I get a good view of Kili everyday!

I have settled into my accommodation at the hospital and am now getting used to the work here. Surgeries are starting to pour in, so that also makes my days more worthwhile. The surgeries performed here are neither groundbreaking nor mind-blowing, but given the facilities and resources that are available, they are incredibly fascinating.

Heartbreaking Stuff

Just walking around the wards, without even speaking to the patients, my heart sinks to the ground. Young boys with tumours so large that they have become inoperable; an old woman so yellowed from jaundice but with no money to pay for treatment; an old man with chest infection after surgery but no supportive therapy available; there are relatives all around the wards, so hopeful but yet with so little to hope for.

...Step By Step

I figured some of you might be interested about the nitty-gritty things that

I go through daily...

FOOD at the hospital canteen is a mix of rice and meat, rice and meat, or rice and meat. Ok, I exaggerate. Maybe there are some vegetables too. But dinner is home-cooked, and is made up of mostly greens and fruits grown in the garden next to the house – all organic!!

I'm LIVING with a missionary couple on the hospital compound. They've been in Africa for over 20 years, on and off, and have lived all over Africa, including in Zambia and Kenya! Their home is comfy, but there are still daily power cuts and water shortages.

TOWN is Moshi, and is 15km away. Getting there from Kibosho is a voyage. Firstly, I have to walk for about 30 minutes to the nearby village, Kirema. Then, I take the exciting *dala dala* down the bumpiest road for about 60-90 minutes, depending on how many stops we make and how many times the bus breaks down.

TANZANIAN DIARIES

By Dr Grace Tan

You can see Mt Kilimanjaro from Kibosho Hospital!



(1) Mr Tan, the surgeon I am working with at Kibosho Hospital, assessing a Maasai patient. (2) The women are the backbone of Tanzania. (3) Simple laboratory in Kibosho Hospital.

February 2010

JUMBO! I'm back with more tales from Africa!

The last week has been a real blessing. I am certainly getting more involved in hospital work, and the staff have slowly accepted me as a regular face. The MAs and AMOs are now approaching me for advice, and even the nurses are accepting my help on the wards! I am still called the Mzungu (foreign) doctor, but I'm starting to feel a sense of belonging.

Despite the ultra-ulu location, I am starting to enjoy the rural-ness of Kibosho, and am discovering beautiful people and places all around. Kibosho is a coffee growing area, so I get to taste fresh green coffee beans everywhere I walk!

Last weekend was spent in Arusha, which is the next town from Moshi. I went to visit a friend who was working on a rose farm in Usa River, just outside Arusha. The Moshi-Arusha road is busy, but I was treated to the beautiful backdrop of Mount Kilimanjaro all through the journey! It is really beautiful – I could stare at it for hours!

Surgical Stories

OPERATING days are Tuesdays and Thursdays. There is mix of general surgery, orthopaedic and urology cases. Since I've been here, we have performed three open prostatectomies! That's more than I have

seen in Singapore. I brought some hernia meshes over as well, and did the first mesh repair in Kibosho! Ha!

I have met some incredible PATIENTS at the hospital. Their warmth, gratitude and quiet spirits have shown me what it means to be joyful in all things.

DEATH is part of everyday life here. Of course there is still pain and sadness when a loved one passes on, but the families accept the loss as a "matter of fact" and swiftly arrange for the funeral processions. The patients themselves also know that there is little that we can offer them; most of the sick ones just lie in bed waiting for their time...

Greetings are very important to Tanzanians! They can spend the first 30 seconds just greeting each other. So, for the interested, here are some of the words I first learnt:

- Habari? – How are things?
- Nzuri – Good, nice (the answer to Habari?)
- Mambo – The greeting that young people use, and which means "What's up?" (Zouk was the only thing that came to my mind before I knew Swahili!)
- Jumbo – Hello!
- Shikamu – A greeting for the elderly

March 2010

The countdown begins! The three months have been an incredible adventure! But as with all adventures – there has to be an end! Nevertheless, I am looking forward to being back home.

I spent last week in a Catholic health centre in Korogwe. Funnily enough, I was put up in a room in the convent! I am now back in Moshi, and two of my primary school mates – Carol and Tracy, are arriving in Tanzania in a few days! We will be going on Safari and climbing Kili! I will have to tell you all about it when I am back in Singapore. See you all soon!

As I leave this extraordinary country, the magnitude of its needs weigh heavily on me. The poorest Africans barely have one meal a day, they struggle to put their children through school, and they continue to die from preventable and treatable diseases... It just seems as if they have more of a past than a future. Is there really a solution to all this?

An opportunity to give

1) I chanced upon BERY'S PLACE during a bike tour in Uganda. It was started by Bery Glazer, a trained nurse in 2006, and serves as a crisis relief centre for the young and marginalised females on Ssesse Island on Lake Victoria, Uganda. Most of the girls are HIV positive, and try to make ends meet by prostituting themselves. I was shocked to learn that the incidence of HIV was as high as 80% on the island. Despite this, there is not a single doctor on the island.

At Bery's Place, the most needy girls are provided food, accommodation, and more importantly, someone who cares. There is a small clinic, where Bery carries out CD4 counts, STD tests, and distributes anti-retroviral drugs. The centre will surely benefit from the service of a doctor, and Bery is very much looking for someone who can volunteer for three months or more.

2) ST. JOSEPH HEALTH CENTRE in Korogwe, was started by a Catholic convent in 1993, and is being run by an AMO and her four staff nurses. They have 60 inpatient beds, a simple laboratory, and a small and modestly equipped OT. Patients come from villages and towns 40 km away because they trust the church, and are mostly given free treatment at the centre. I helped with a few minor operations during my time there.

The sisters have plans to expand the health centre into a district hospital, but are lacking funds, staff and equipment. If anyone is looking for a project to invest his or her time and money in, I think this health centre is pretty worthwhile.

If anyone is interested in contributing to either of these projects, please let me know and I can fill you in on the details! **SMA**



Grace, surgeon in training! Writing to raise awareness about the volunteer opportunities in Africa and encouraging junior doctors to take time off to do something out of the ordinary! Grace can be contacted at gracethc@gmail.com



(1) Bery's Place. (2) The entrance to Korogwe Health Centre. (3) Wind-driven water pump in Korogwe. (4) Performing a hysterectomy - check out the size of the fibroid!

