

5 months off.....

I am a GP in Northumberland and first got involved in Simbiri Nan Bell Health Centre after studying tropical medicine. I wanted to take a sabbatical from my day job. A chance conversation with a friend led me to Simbiri and I could not have been luckier.

The health centre is in Western Kenya near Lake Victoria. The population are largely subsistence farmers. HIV prevalence is 27% - the highest in Kenya - and 214 children in every 1000 die before their fifth birthday. The health centre does not have mains electricity and only uses a generator for two hours each day. There is no running water.

Here is a day in the life of a volunteer doctor at Simbiri. Needless to say I did not have 5 months 'off' but I did have the most amazing time of my life, learning a lot about myself as well as offering some support to this great facility.

Simbiri is on the equator and the sun rises sharply at 0630. Birds can be heard singing and there is the sound of water from people filling their buckets from the water tanks and the smell of wood smoke as the cook stokes the fire ready for preparing breakfast. Stretching under the mosquito net it is hard to know where the night has gone. The air is fresh first thing but still hotter than the best day of an English summer. I get up and rinse my face in a teacup of water which I then use to flush the toilet in the house. With the luxury of a cooker in the guest house (gas cylinder fuelled) I make some toast for breakfast. One of the joys of living in such a frugal setting is learning how to make do. Toast is more like fried bread but it hits the spot with a mug of boiled water. I clean my teeth and smother myself in chalky factor 50 sunscreen to face the day's heat.

Soon after 8 I visit each of the wards and greet the patients. Greeting people is such a huge part of the Luo culture and a deeply humbling activity that we no longer seem to relish in the west. It is gratifying to see how patients who had been comatose 24 hours earlier are now sitting up and awaiting their breakfast. Around 9 o'clock the clinical officers and nurses do a ward round. There is so much to learn and see, but also plenty to offer and help with. Afterwards I might see some patients or prepare a teaching session for the staff. Other options each day include walking to villages and offering some HIV prevention advice (along with condoms and a trusty condom demonstrator) or taking a matatu (a taxi, but not as you know it) to the nearest town for food.

The highlight of the day is lunch – I usually buy 2 chapatis from the 'hoteli', the cookhouse that prepares all the patients food. In the afternoon I spend time at the clinic, either with patients or simply spending time with the staff hearing about their lives and laughing and sharing stories. It is so hot that the pace of life is very slow and spending time in a group just sitting but not speaking becomes a very pleasant pastime. At moments like this we learn a lot about ourselves and how our lives in the UK are driven by self-imposed busyness.

In fact there is a second highlight to the day and that is the shower that I have at about 4 pm - a third of a bucket of water warmed in the equatorial sun and poured over the head with a plastic cup. Nothing can beat it – certainly not the shower in Schipol airport that you spent the whole five

months looking forward to. So for 10 minutes of the day I feel fresh and don't smell but it is soon spoiled by the need to smother myself in anti-mosquito lotion.

Next I walk to the little market in Simbiri to look for something for tea. The choice will be rice and tomatoes or rice and sikumawiki (a bit like kale) or, if I am lucky, a couple of free range eggs. This is how life is – no choice makes you less busy and less stressed.

The sunsets quickly at 6 30 pm and I wander across to the clinic for the evening. Evenings are often busy, perhaps as people must travel before night falls. Many people arrive unconscious from malaria or bleeding from wounds sustained in the fields. I go to bed early – a bonus of no electricity. The nights are hot and humid under the grilling of the corrugated iron roof that makes the house feel like an oven. In the darkness sounds travel. Laughing hyenas answer barking guard dogs. The wailing of people is a sure sound of a nearby death, someone's personal tragedy.

If you want to learn about how hard life can be, see illnesses that you never dreamt of seeing, watch how effectively simple measures can save lives and understand better how our stress and busyness in the west is self-inflicted, then come to Simbiri. You won't regret it.

Oh, and by the way if you go for 5 months it is a great way to grow out your hair dye.....There are no mirrors.

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