Children with Cancer in Malawi

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Summer 2014 Newsletter

Congratulations

Professor Elizabeth Molyneux receives an Honorary degree

On 10 July, Professor Molyneux received a well-deserved honorary Doctor of Science degree from Newcastle University. This honour, which is only given to a few outstanding leaders in their field, was bestowed upon her for her contribution to Child Health in sub-Saharan Africa. She gave a moving and inspirational address to the medical students, who were graduating in the same ceremony. This degree was partly in recognition of the work that CCM and Professor Molyneux do together to improve the treatment and outcome of children who suffer from cancer in Malawi. Thank you to all of you.

Professor Elizabeth Molyneux with (left to right) Professor Sir Liam Donaldson (Chancellor, Newcastle University), her husband Professor Malcolm Molyneux, and Professor Chris Brink (Vice-Chancellor).

If you wish to see the ceremony, you can find it at https://nuvision.ncl.ac.uk/Play/2592

The year so far....

Another 6 months has flown by since our last newsletter. The progress for children with cancer in Malawi continues, thanks to all of the generous donations we continue to receive from all of you despite continuing worldwide economic hardship. Thank you once again to our friends at St. Andrews - your sustained generosity is much appreciated by the Malawi team.

There have been a number of exciting developments in Blantyre. Firstly, the yearly delivery of toys we sent arrived amidst much excitement. Professor Simon Bailey (CCM Trustee) visited the ward in April and saw first-hand that the children arrive with nothing, and that the availability of toys they can play with helps them immensely. “It was particularly touching to see a blind child who became very attached to a wooden Giraffe that made a clicking noise. The feel of moving the neck and hearing the noise lit up his face - he played with it a lot in the week I was there and never lost his enthusiasm for it”, he said.

Well done to Dr. Chagaluka, who has been asked to stay in Cape Town for an additional year to enable him to get his specialist medical exams. This will help the unit in the long run as it will give him extra status with the government when he is trying to facilitate developments in paediatric oncology in Malawi.

We have continued to supply an ever-increasing range of chemotherapy drugs to enable the children to have improved treatments. This has been possible thanks to the nursing input from Sister Di Lullo (one of our trustees), and the team have become more used to recognising potential problems associated with more intensive treatments. The first 4 children on the newly intensified Acute leukaemia treatment protocol have now received their intensive block of treatment. This should significantly improve their chances of long-term survival. There are also more children with eye tumours being treated with chemotherapy to enhance their prognosis. This has also resulted in more children being referred from around the country and has made the unit busier.

With the increased activity, the ward is becoming busier. Plans have been drawn up for an outpatient and day unit facility to increase the number of children that can be cared for. Professor Molyneux and ourselves will be looking for capital funding for this but CCM has promised to help in providing equipment for this exciting project.

Fun in the ward playroom….

The cartridges for the electrolyte machine that we provide continue to be invaluable for the children's care. The machine has enabled the salts in the blood to be corrected to normal levels accurately, rather than by guesswork, and this has saved many lives.

The microscope camera continues to be a major asset to Professor Molyneux and her team. Dr. Peter Carey from Newcastle has put in many hours, looking daily at the films sent via. the internet from the camera in Malawi, and helping the team diagnose the various types of tumours. We have now provided answers on over 650 children in just over 2 years.

Finally, we would like to wish Professor Malcolm Molyneux all the best, as he has recently started chemotherapy for chronic leukaemia. He has responded very well and both he and Elizabeth remain very much in our thoughts.

Thank you to you all for your generosity in really improving the treatment and outcome for children in Malawi with cancer. To all of you, from all the children, staff and CCM trustees, thank you for being the best supporters we could possibly wish for.

Zikomo Nduthi.

The Children with Cancer in Malawi Trustees.

Betty's the (play) lady

By Prof. Elizabeth Molyneux

Betty is our play lady and has been in the oncology ward for about 8 years. She tells me she loves her job; and we know that the children love her. There is a small play area in the ward and every morning Betty unrolls the floor mats and puts out toys for the children to choose from. While waiting for the ward round to get to 'their' bed and immediately after they have been seen, the children gather on the mats on the floor and play together. Betty plays with them and makes sure that the little ones get as many turns with the cars and the puzzles as the bigger children. Bedbound patients are given toys to play with in bed. The bigger boys love the farm sets and the Lego; the girls seem to like the colouring and the dolls with hair to braid. Blind children enjoy the noisy toys.

"My first job is to make sure the children are happy", says Betty, "but I also help the nurses. I know where the notes are filed and get them ready for the outpatients; I roll cotton balls while playing with the children and often take patients or samples to the pharmacy or lab."

Betty is often the first to know about any troubles in the family or village at home for the children and their mothers. She is a good listening ear for worried or frightened children. She can explain ward procedures to the families and reassure them.

Betty is a widow, looking after several grandchildren of her own and trying to put them through school.

The nurses on the ward say "Betty is a very important member of our team. She knows all the children and their families and helps the children to relax and enjoy themselves. She helps us too."

Betty is part of the ward structure! It is impossible to imagine Sobo without her.

A message from Prof. Molyneux

I am writing from Liverpool. For the first time in 20 years, Malcolm and I are out of Malawi for more than 3 weeks at a time. This time it will be for several months as Malcolm receives chemotherapy for chronic lymphocytic leukaemia. The treatment is not available in Malawi.

I was very worried at leaving the ward, the children and staff in oncology in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for so long without anyone to help them. Mr. Banda, Sisters Thundu, Licholeche, Mumba, N'gong'a, and Chisale have a wealth of experience and Sister Kumwenda is settling in fast…. but then Dr. Kicky Mittermayer came back to Malawi. Kicky is a German paediatrician who has worked in our department before and decided to return after a few years working in other developing countries. Kicky has bravely taken on the running of the oncology ward while I am away and before Dr. George Chagaluka finishes his training in August 2015. The Newcastle CCM team are as brilliant as ever in supporting with drugs, salaries for staff, diagnostics and advice, and I keep in regular touch.

There have been elections in Malawi and we have a new president. This always means changes in the civil service and disruption to routines. Drug availability remains a huge problem and if it were not for Children with Cancer in Malawi, we would be unable to help many children. Inflation is still high which means transport costs for follow-ups are exorbitant for families. Being able to help them with transport monies is hugely helpful.

England is hot at a time when Blantyre has been unusually cold! The children have needed extra blankets and jerseys (donated by local friends).

The Christmas toys arrived a few months late – held up in customs – but all arrived safe and sound and the children have such fun with all the carefully chosen toys and play things.

Thank you to you all for remembering and caring for them, not only as patients but as little children.

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