Children with Cancer in Malawi

UK Registered charity no. 1111112

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Winter 2014-15 Newsletter

The Year in Malawi....

Another year has flown by, and like in many places, the children in Malawi are getting excited as Christmas approaches.

In 2014, the children on the Oncology ward at Queen Elizabeth Hospital have a better chance than ever of being cured of their cancer. This is mainly due to your generosity in providing an ever increasing range of drugs – both chemotherapy and anti-vomiting drugs necessary for stopping the side-effects of chemotherapy. You have all been incredibly generous and, as always, our Friends at St. Andrews have been particularly generous.

As you will be aware from our July newsletter, Professor Molyneux has been in the UK whilst her husband, Malcolm, had his chemotherapy. We are very happy to report that he has done extremely well, and they are returning to Malawi in the first week of January. Thankfully, Dr. Kicky Mittermayer stepped in to fill the breech, and has done a fantastic job (see her article below). Throughout, Professor Molyneux has been on hand to provide wise words and suggestions.

CCM has sent out our annual collection of toys to Malawi, lovingly chosen by our Chairman, Ian Sharkey, and his wife, Joan. The children love these and they are in constant use. Kate Mallard, an Oncology nursing sister from Birmingham, spent 6 months in Malawi on the Oncology ward, which was very helpful to the local staff, and has reinforced the excellent work that has already been done by one of our Trustees, Hannah Di Lullo.

The microscope camera bought by you all continues to be invaluable in diagnosing children with cancer. The electrolyte machine (and cartridges also bought by you all) is another invaluable aid in ensuring that the children are able to be given treatment in a safer way. Another exciting development is that we, in conjunction with Professor Molyneux, have developed an improved treatment plan for children with Burkitt lymphoma, the commonest type of childhood cancer in Malawi. The treatment protocol has been running for 2 years now, and the first analysis seems to show that the survival rate has improved by between 15-20%, which is great news.

We are hopeful that the New Year will bring further improvements for the children in Malawi. Dr. Chagaluka will be returning from Cape Town soon, after completing his training as the first qualified Malawian paediatric oncologist - very exciting indeed.

May you all have a peaceful and joyous Christmas and, on behalf of the children and staff in Malawi, a huge thank you.

Zikomo Nduthi.

The Children with Cancer in Malawi Trustees.

My Time in Blantyre

By Dr. Kicky Mittermayer

Having last left Malawi in 2010, I decided to return in 2014 as a United National Volunteer, to support clinical services in Malawi.

I remember the day we were leaving Germany, when I received an e-mail from Liz Molyneux, asking me if I could run "her" oncology ward in Blantyre during her absence. My initial reaction was 'NO!'. How can anybody fit into Liz shoes? Once I arrived in Malawi, I was looking forward to an intensive handover period from Liz, but as it turned out Liz had to leave 2 days after my arrival, as Malcolm was about to start chemotherapy. So, I was quickly and briefly introduced to the team of nurses and Mr. Banda, had my introduction in the ward and the lab. where I was shown how to work with the camera and microscope. I was introduced to Prof. Simon Bailey and Dr. Peter Carey from Newcastle via email……and then I was on my own!

Mr. Banda and the nursing team were of immense help and support to me. I quickly learnt how to use the existing treatment protocols, followed standard recommendations, attended the daily outpatient clinic and followed and became part of the daily ward rounds. The ward is so well organized and structured that this suited my personal and professional work style quite well. Liz was always available via e-mails and supported me with her great experience without taking the lead out of my hands; thank you Liz for having so much confidence and trust in me.

I have never previously had long-term experience in a paediatric oncology ward. This meant that my clinical oncology experience was quite limited and, on top of that, the emotional aspects of working in a paediatric oncology ward was always something I was sure I did not want to cope with. Too much bad news, too many disappointing results, breaking bad news and trying to give strength to families, would I be able to manage that?

What can I say? Yes it was challenging many times. I often found comforting words from the nurses, especially the older and very experienced ones in the ward, who were very helpful and supportive, but also in the palliative care team. They are not only of great support to the patients, but also to us as a team. I also learnt that bad news is not the end, but that we have something very valuable to offer, good palliative and supportive care, which is so important in such a life changing situation.

I would never have chosen to take the lead of the oncology ward; however, I am very grateful for the clinical, emotional, personal and professional experience I have gained and I am extremely grateful for the trust given me and the time I was able to spend here. I am very much looking forward to Liz's return, not that I would not like to continue to work in paediatric oncology here in Blantyre, but knowing that Malcolm has made a great recovery and Liz is able to return fills my heart with joy and happiness.

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