Children with Cancer in Malawi

UK Registered charity no. 1111112

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Autumn-Winter 2021 Newsletter

Thank You!!

As always a huge thank you to our many supporters who have continued to support the children in Malawi through thick and thin. It has been a challenging 18 months around the globe with many facing personal challenges but your support has been unwavering, none more so than our friends at St Andrews.

Dr Chagaluka and the team have continued to work very hard to ensure the children in Malawi get the best possible care. This is on the background of multiple COVID 19 waves. These have particularly resulted in increased transport costs for patients and their families, making access to treatment more challenging. The team has been boosted by the arrival of Dr Beatrice Phiri as a paediatric oncologist in training. Professor Molyneux also managed to visit, which boosted the team in Blantyre.

CCM has continued to pay for and deliver chemotherapy drugs, as well as pay for nurses salaries, a pharmacist, and the running costs for the invaluable blood counter and electrolyte machine. The remote pathology service offered by the Newcastle team, led by Dr Peter Carey, continues to provide invaluable support enabling a rapid diagnosis for a significant number of patients.

Thank you once again to all of you, you are the heartbeat that helps the Children with Cancer in Malawi.

Zikomo Kwambiri.

The CCM Trustees

A Return to Malawi

by Prof. Elizabeth Molyneux

Travel has been difficult for all of us during this pandemic. The UK government severely restricted visits to most countries in Africa, and some, including Malawi, closed their borders to non-resident visitors when waves of COVID infection hit them. Flights were cancelled, and last year, right at the start of it all, CCM members Simon Bailey and Hannah DiLullo had to shorten their visit to Blantyre and negotiate seats on one of the few planes still flying out of Malawi.

In June this year, Malawi was (and still is) on the red list, but flights were up and running and after completing much paperwork and a pre-visit COVID PCR test I was able to finally travel to Blantyre after nearly 16 months away. It was good to be back.

George and the team are all well and the ward is busy. Many of the children in the ward arrive with advanced tumours, probably because COVID and the rising costs of transport have delayed their parents from seeking help. George had no registrar when I was there and so he, and the two clinical officers Eunice Chakumatha and Kondwani Banda were doing all the ward rounds, procedures and outpatient clinics. George, who is also Head of Department, often came in at 7am in the morning and did an early ward round to be able to stay on top of things. I do not think he has had a proper holiday for well over 18 months. Hopefully Beatrice, a newly qualified paediatrician will be joining him very soon for several months before she goes to Cape Town to follow in George's footsteps and specialise in oncology. Nursing and medical numbers are slowly increasing and the team is getting ever stronger.

Towards the end of my visit coronavirus infections began to rise and Malawi is now enduring a third wave of the virus. As you all know this skews the hospital's focus and inevitably means that staff are affected by isolating or illness. Sadly, in this surge of infections, Mrs Thundu, one of our founding oncology nurses, with whom I had worked for almost three decades and who retired a couple of years ago, lost her husband.

These are difficult times for all health systems and health workers, but all eyes are on a brighter future and with help from CCM and others, the team in the QECH in Blantyre are mulling over plans for a larger ward, improving the psychosocial support to families and children and training more district hospital staff about early diagnosis and referral.

"Together we can do it"

Goodbye Mr. Banda

It is with great sadness that we let you all know that Mr. Banda (of motorbike fame) passed away suddenly in the last few weeks. He served the unit for many years as a clinical officer and was a vital cog in the unit. CCM supporters will also remember him for visiting children for follow up visits in often difficult to get to places on his motorbike. He will be sorely missed and our condolences have been sent to his family and friends.

All the Latest From Blantyre

by Dr George Chagaluka

It has been seven months since we started this year. A lot has happened in the Unit. During the year, we have welcomed new staff, welcomed visitors and launched programmes that will improve survival from childhood cancer.

NEW STAFF

The Paediatric Oncology ward is pleased to welcome Dr Beatrice Phiri. Dr Phiri is a newly qualified paediatrician who will soon leave for South Africa to complete a two year Fellowship in Paediatric Oncology. Dr Phiri is smart, hardworking and very friendly to guardians and their children. She will be a perfect companion in the ward.

In addition to Dr Phiri, a new data officer has recently joined the unit. Her name is Elizabeth Mazengera. Elizabeth is a qualified nursing officer who gratefully accepted the offer of working as a data officer. Her role is to collect patient data, organize follow ups and provide welcome packs for admitted patients. She sometimes wears the nurse's hat whenever there is a shortage of nurses. Elizabeth is humble and always calm.

VISITORS

Our spirits were lighted up when we had two visitors in the unit. These were Prof Molyneux and Dr T. Israels. Prof Molyneux is the founder of the Unit and a perfect mentor who makes sure that the ward runs smoothly. She usually visits every six months. She was unable to visit us for a year or so due to travel restrictions following the COVID-19 Pandemic. The other visitor was Dr Israels who is a coordinator of CANCARE.

CANCER EARLY WARNING SIGNS (EWS) TRAINING

The majority of the patients that are admitted in the ward present in late stages of their disease. This is due to a lack of disease awareness by primary care physicians and guardians. We have started training primary care physicians on red flags of childhood cancer. The participants are drawn from district hospitals in the Southern region of Malawi. The impact is visible. We have seen an increase in referral of cases for cancer diagnosis and this has given us an impetus to train physicians in the whole country followed by mentorship.

NURSES' INTERVIEWS

The ward has five nurses who are on salaries from World Child Cancer and Children with Cancer in Malawi. These nurses recently attended interviews organized by the Malawi Government so that they can be incorporated on the government payroll. We are praying for all of them.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Malawi has experienced three waves. The second wave was devasting. We lost two cabinet ministers and several prominent politicians. The third wave has just started, but we are experiencing more paediatric infections and deaths with this wave than in the last two waves. Cumulatively, the country has registered 48,066 covid cases and 1,458 deaths. Vaccinations have restarted following a short hiatus due to shortage of vaccines. In terms of impact on cancer care, we have seen increased public transport costs. This has brought in challenges in terms of accessing cancer care.

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