



Vision Aid Overseas

VAO Project in Sierra Leone

(Visit May 2010)

Sponsor's Newsletter



Vision Aid Overseas set up an optometry clinic at the Sight Savers Government Hospital in Bo, Sierra Leone, in 1992. They advertised for staff, interviewed and initially appointed four students who were taught to carry out eye examinations and glaze frames. All this is funded by VAO with support and training by VAO volunteers .

Except for the war years, VAO has sent teams out there regularly for all this time.

This visit was a follow on from previous trips made by VAO teaching teams. Our mission was to identify all local eye care facilities and to encourage efficient management of these clinics.

Neither ash nor cabin crew were able to prevent our journey. Chris had come with me in February last year but for Eamonn and Penny it was their first experience of West Africa.

This year our country partner was the Government, rather than Sight Savers, due to reorganisation of the local policies. It meant we were able to review all the eye care programmes in the area, including our original partners, Sight Savers. We took up the offer of self catering accommodation at Kissy Eye Hospital, which worked extremely well. Gin and tonic in one hand and cooking utensils in



The team. Penny, Eamonn, Ruth and Chris

the other, this provided an opportunity for discussion and report writing as well as a fun and jovial atmosphere. It also worked out much cheaper, which left funding available to buy equipment and spare bulbs for the local ophthalmic nurses.

Our host here was John Buchan, a Yorkshire ophthalmologist working in Freetown for four years with Christoffel Blindenmission (CBM). We observed his post cataract clinic and also joined his team on Outreach clinics travelling to outlying villages for eye care and treatment. This included medicines and drops as well as ready made spectacles. James, the ophthalmic nurse performed the eye exams – well, actually it was me on that particular day!. We supplied him with an ophthalmoscope and he was truly grateful.

Training in optometry has now been achieved in Sierra Leone and the refractionists and workshop technicians have been working since 1992 and perform the job well. Our challenge this time was setting up a business model, concentrating on stock control and ordering the frames and lenses. This was quite frustrating as there was a consignment of stock sitting at the airport, awaiting clearance from some government official to exempt the payment of customs duty. It wasn't until another official came to have his eyes examined and realised the situation, that mobile phone calls were made and we hopefully got something moving.

We spent several sessions lecturing to the optical staff, refractionists, cataract surgeons and ophthalmic nurses on the value of measuring

p.t.o.



Mural at Kissy Eye Hospital in a tropical storm. Bartimeus, Jesus and the 'Iarnin' (learning) boys' (Krio language for disciples).

Ruth Perrott

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acuity and principles of lenses. This was very well received and they are all anxious to learn. We had with us PowerPoint presentations which had been prepared on behalf of VAO and this made the task so much easier to present and understand.

We were able to re-establish contact with two VAO trained refractionists, Ebu and Momodu, both who have moved on from Sight Savers and now working for other charities. It was lovely to catch up with them and we gave each more equipment to improve the services they offer..

Ebu was chief refractionist and optical glazer at Kissy, while Momodu worked at Serabu for an American Charity where all the services, recycled spectacles and surgical operations were donated FREE to the local public. All the other centres were having to work toward a sustainable business model, charging enough to make themselves self sufficient. The biggest issue was budgeting and knowing how to charge and plan for the future. Clearing the blank lens stock through

customs was another major issue and we discovered that if consignments were less than \$2000 in value, then they will be cleared straight through.

We had a wonderful visit to two schools for the blind, in Freetown and in Bo. A black blind child must appear a hopeless case but this was proved quite wrong when we were introduced to Mohammed, a totally blind 9 year old who showed us how to write in Braille using the braille writing frame. The pin punctures the paper, starting from the top right hand corner, such that when the paper is turned over, the fingers start at the top left. He was active in the debating society and sang in the school choir and upon request burst forth with a 'Praise to the Lord' solo which brought tears to our eyes. Bless him, he was so confident and I am sure that he will go a long way. The children do their own laundry and identify their own clothes on the line, entirely by both touch and smell. There are certain rules in the school and when these are broken, the school court sits to decide the penalty. Misdemeanours include speaking the local language, Krio, or walking on the wrong side of the corridor, Pupils themselves run the court in a democratic way.

Last year we visited the building site for the hospital at Kenema and this time we were able to view the (nearly) finished project. The 'Grand Opening' was imminent but still with areas to finish off. There was disagreement as to payment for connection to the electricity supply.

Inflation is rife and whereas I

received 4,200 Leones to the pound last year, this year it was 6,000. Just for the record, I read that in 1964, there were just 2 Leones to the pound! How's that for inflation?. Is it any wonder that they run out of money?

The ferry was not running from the airport on our arrival and this meant a 110 mile detour on bumpy roads around the bay, resulting in our arrival at Kissy (Freetown) at 4.30 am. Coming home we caught a water taxi (25 mins across the water) to take a road taxi for the final mile from the beach to the airport. However the car had no brakes and it careered backwards down a 1 in 2 slope crashing into the bank causing severe damage. No prolonged injuries but this just proves that there is no guaranteed way of getting from Lungi airport to Freetown.

Funds have therefore gone farther this year and I thank you for supporting me on this venture. I was able to buy much needed ophthalmoscope bulbs for the ophthalmic nurses, so desperate to have them. There were redundant ophthalmoscopes at Kenema, only one of which had a bulb. Ordering any equipment involves five administration levels for the request and for the reply to come back via the same route. No wonder things take a long time to move....

Thank you so much for supporting me in this project. I have been able to fund a slim line test chart, polarised visors, ophthalmoscope bulbs and a complete set of trial lenses through your generous contributions.

Bless you for your support.

Ruth



Mohammed singing his solo...



Penny teaching the staff at Bo Hospital.