

Royal College of Anaesthetists (19/10/05)

Citation-- Dr Keith Thomson

It was an article in the Daily Telegraph in September 1990 that challenged Keith Thomson, then a newly appointed consultant anaesthetist, to visit Africa as a volunteer on the Mercy Ship Anastasis. Mercy Ships is an international Christian charity which delivers surgical, medical and community development aid to West African countries using a converted ocean liner as a base. The chance of a working holiday providing anaesthesia for maxillofacial surgery was initially a pleasant distraction from his NHS practice, but it quickly grew into a consuming passion with Dr Keith, as he is known within the organisation. Fifteen years later Mercy Ships has benefited from his work as anaesthetist, fund raiser and ambassador and is now, with the commissioning of a new ship equipped with six operating theatres, a very significant influence on the fragile health systems of West Africa.

Keith trained in anaesthesia at the Royal Free, St Bartholomew's and University College Hospitals, and moved to his current post as an obstetric anaesthetist in North Hampshire in 1995 after a spell at Wexham Park Hospital.

Keith has a refreshing view of humanitarian aid that is slightly at odds with conventional political wisdom. He traces it back to an incident on a visit ashore in Sierra Leone when his personal intervention, in the form of a surgeon's fee for a Caesarean section, saved the life of a young woman in obstructed labour. Keith believes in the responsibility of the individual to generate major change by personal acts of charity, direct involvement and encouragement of others to do the same. He has provided Mercy Ships with a stream of anaesthetists and operating department practitioners from all over the world, eager to do their 3 weeks for Africa and recruited by amusing and heroic tales of problem airways. And while Africa may exercise most of his energy outside the NHS, his interest in obstetric anaesthesia has spawned a series of lecture programmes in the Baltic states and Moscow, modelled on the WFSA series, but his own creation and production, and like his African experiences, supported by a legion of eager recruits to the cause.

It is a desperate irony that someone who has put so much energy into relieving the distress of patients with maxillofacial disorders should himself be so afflicted but I am pleased to report that Keith approached his own illness with the spirit that he tackled Africa. We look forward to hearing of his recovery and reading more accounts with eye catching titles such as 'Sun, Sea but not much Sux in Sierra Leone'! We hope that this award of the Jubilee medal will demonstrate the admiration which the Royal College of Anaesthetists has for Keith's work at home and in the developing world.