



# MERCY MEDICINE

Jackie Macadam meets a doctor with some unusual case histories.

**When Dr Keith Thomson, consultant anaesthetist with the 'Mercy Ships' charity, emerged from Conakry Airport in Guinea, the first thing he spotted was a large sign with his name on it ...**

The message, in large childish writing, read, "Uncle Keith Thank you for saving my life and my mom's. You are very welcome!" Just seeing that brought a lump to Keith's throat – he knew exactly who he'd find holding the sign up. ...

Five years before, in Sierra Leone's main maternity hospital in Freetown, he'd been walking through the wards with a friend when he'd spotted a young woman, in her teens, obviously in labour and not doing well.

"What's wrong with her?" he'd asked his friend.

"She's dying," came the reply. "She's been in obstructed labour for four or five days now and needs a caesarean, but her family can't raise the money. She's only 17."

Keith had always made a point of trying to maintain a professional distance from the people he met during his work as consultant anaesthetist working in some of the poorest parts of the world with the Mercy Ships.

But something about this young woman touched him, and he said he would pay for her to have the operation. A fortune for her family – too much for her husband, Augustine, to raise to save her and her

baby's life – the operation only cost Keith around £70.

He was pleased to hear later that she'd come through the op fine, and had delivered a healthy baby girl called Regina.

And so it was a happy reunion five years later, when Keith, Catherine, Regina and Augustine, met up again. That was in 1998 – and two years ago, Keith met the family again, now settled in their new home near Sydney in Australia. Catherine is training to be a nurse and Regina is top of her class at school and doing very well.

Born in Dundee and educated at Glenalmond College near Perth, it's a long way from the career Keith had planned when he went to Edinburgh University to study mechanical engineering.

"I shared a flat with a medical student," he said. "And I just always thought that his stuff was so much more interesting than my work, that even after I got my degree, and started working in Watford, when the chance came to study medicine I applied immediately. I just knew that was what I wanted to do."

"After qualifying, I worked through the medical ranks until 1979 when I started to do anaesthetics at the Royal Free Hospital in London.

"During my time as a student, I'd done an elective at a mission hospital in the Transkei. It was my first experience of Africa, and I loved the country. I worked at the Greenville Mission Hospital, run by a medical practice in Seattle in the USA. There were five or six partners who would rotate from Seattle to work at the mission hospital. It was fantastic experience – I did maternity, trauma, surgery, medical practice – TB was rife – and even dentistry! I was always treated as a doctor, and was soon able to do lots of minor procedures that students here never get a chance to try."

In 1990, and now an anaesthetist, he spotted an ad in a newspaper asking for medical people to help out for a couple of weeks or more on the Anastasis, a converted cruise liner now dedicated to bringing medicine and surgical procedures to people who would almost certainly not be seen by a doctor. "I didn't think I'd be able to go, because I was busy, but at the last minute, my operating list was cancelled, and I went to the docks in London to see the ship. Anastasis is Greek

for 'resurrection,' and I knew I wanted to go."

Mercy Ships was set up 30 years ago in 1978. The original funding for the project was Swiss and the 'Anastasis' was sold to the now President Don Stephens at less than the scrap value. The conversion needed lots of work which was all done by dedicated volunteers. She sailed on her first humanitarian mission in 1986.

Now, 18 years later and semi-retired, Keith still spends as much time working with Mercy Ships as he can, in between his home in Basingstoke, visiting his mother who lives by Forfar, and his holiday home in Portugal. And Keith recently fought his own battle with cancer.

"An injection in my mouth during a dental operation damaged the nerves in the left side of my tongue, and I kept chewing it accidentally over the course of 25 years. I developed cancer in the damaged area and underwent a ten-hour operation in 2005 to excise the tumour. Now I can't produce saliva, and have to sip fluids constantly. The thing that kept me going through the really bad times was the desire to get back to my work in Africa."

"The Anastasis finally had to be scrapped in 2007, so there is only the 'The Africa Mercy' active in the area at the moment. It was purchased in 1999 by Anne Gloag, and has 6 surgical theatres, 80 ward beds and a two bed intensive care unit. It even has a school for the long term crew's children so their education doesn't suffer.

"The ship will dock and stay in an area for around 10 months. It used to be a shorter stay, but we found that we didn't have the time to follow-up cases properly," Keith said.

And his work with Mercy Ships has been an eye opener.

"We repair a large number of facial tumours and cleft palates. On one early expedition to Togo, we wondered why there weren't any children with cleft lips coming in when we normally got them everywhere else. We found out later that when a baby is born there with this deformity, it's put into a box and buried alive. It's so sad when they can be mended so easily.

"We also repair vesico-vaginal fistulas, small holes in the bladder that can cause women a lifetime of incontinence. Young girls who are basically too small to be having babies can be in labour for far too

long trying to push the baby out, and the pressure of the baby's head stops the blood flow to an area of the bladder. Once the baby is delivered, the tissue dies, and falls away, leaving a hole that will forever leak urine. It's usually a straightforward operation to repair, and the difference it makes to these young women's lives is amazing.

"Some of the facial tumours and cysts we deal with are colossal. We removed one from a man's face recently that weighed 3kg! With a functioning health service they would never normally get to be that size – but these people have nowhere to go, no other option. When the 'Africa Mercy' arrives, it's seen as a chance for a new life."

Patients are screened soon after the ship's arrival, and assessed medically, so that those who need help most are able to get it. Sometimes separate queues of men and women are formed so that the women and children are not pushed to the back.

"Though Mercy Ships is a Christian charity, we will treat anyone who needs help," Keith says. "It's a real united nations on board. There are 30 or 40 nationalities represented among the 400 members of the crew. They are all volunteers, even the Captain. They all pay to be on board, around \$350 a month."

The 'Africa Mercy' is presently in Liberia, the next port of call in February 2009 will

be Benin. Since 1990 Mercy ships has visited many other African countries including Guinea, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire.

Mercy Ships raised just over £4 million in the UK last year, and Keith is always happy to give talks to interested groups or organisations to try to raise more. For 10 years he has arranged maternity conferences in the Baltic States and often gives presentations to raise awareness about the plight of the 20% of the world's population who have no access to medical care. He is now planning conferences in both Uganda and Liberia.

"Some of our work recently in Sierra Leone has involved the removal of tattoos from former child soldiers. They were branded by their militia groups and are now outcasts, totally rejected by the population. It might seem a minor operation to us, but to them it's a lifeline. A chance of a normal life."

"We have a fantastically dedicated team of people working on the ship – Gary Parker, a specialist facial surgeon who went to work on board for a month in 1986 in Mexico never left and has been a permanent crew member for the past 22 years. The difference we're able to make to our patients is immeasurable." □

[www.mercyships.co.uk](http://www.mercyships.co.uk)

Keith's own website [www.africansmiles.co.uk](http://www.africansmiles.co.uk)



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