

Dr Keith's 'Monrovia Diary' – 14th to 21st November 2010

Introduction

I returned to Monrovia after an absence of two years to run the 4th Liberian Anaesthetic Conference and to visit various projects I have supported since working in Liberia on board the *Africa Mercy* (www.mercyships.org.uk) in 2007, including a school, an orphanage and a church.

Day 1

My colleague Alex (Dr Aleksandra Bojarska from Manchester) and I flew out with four other anaesthetists all from South Wales on a flight from London via Brussels to Robertsfield Airport, arriving on schedule at 8pm. Two colleagues from New York were nowhere to be seen so we loaded our bags into the hotel vehicle and travelled to Monrovia along the now greatly improved pothole free road which had been renovated by the Chinese – but at what cost? After an hour's drive we checked into the Royal Hotel (www.royalhotelliberia.com) which had comfortable en suite bedrooms with plenty of hot water and free wireless internet which was also available in the dining room. It was conveniently situated only a few minutes walk from the John F Kennedy Hospital (JFK). We had a beer and something to eat before retiring to bed. I texted the missing Americans who replied that they were unable to travel to Monrovia due to family illness but would email their presentations.

Day 2

All six of us walked to the JFK Hospital where we were met in the management offices by Dr Billy Johnson, a highly qualified Obstetrician from the USA, who had been in post for a year. In discussions he was obviously concerned about the need for medically trained anaesthetists to work at the hospital and even mentioned an annual salary of \$60,000 + other perks that might be available for the right person. We discovered that a room had not yet been designated for our conference so we remained in his office until a

suitable venue had been found. We then took Garrison and Anthony the local organisers for lunch at Sam's BBQ restaurant about a half mile walk from the hospital. After lunch I negotiated with the hospital catering manager the cost of food to be provided for lunch for all the delegates during the next two days. Some of us visited the new six theatre operating suite which even included a six bedded Recovery Unit with monitors, most of which didn't work, although we did manage to fix two of the pulse oximeters. There were no dedicated recovery nurses, one of the anaesthetic team, usually a student, would accompany the patient to Recovery after their operation and look after them (fig 1) until they were ready to return to the ward.

That night we dined in the Royal Hotel restaurant. After a beer at the outside bar we became acquainted with the hotel pet, a tame black back deer (fig 2).

Day 3

We used hotel transport to take us and our equipment to the conference venue, where we were met by Odecious Johns, a former

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Fig 3.
Driver Odecious Johns in OJ-1

The fuel tank (fig 4) situated in the boot was a large plastic container.



Fig 4.
Fuel tank
in boot!

The first day went very well although the room in the management offices that Alex and I thought we had for our afternoon workshop had been reallocated but after dogged persistence we were found a suitable venue within the school of nursing. That evening the team dined at the excellent restaurant in the *Mambo Point Hotel* situated near the United States Embassy.

Day 4

On the second day of the Conference there were again 55 attendees (fig 5).



Fig 5.
The conference delegates

Luckily I had brought two spare projectors from the UK as the bulb blew in the one provided locally and then one of mine overheated and stopped working. We gave lectures in the morning and then had another good lunch provided by the hospital caterers.

The afternoon started with a Q & A session followed by a quiz and then the *prize giving* proceeded by the handing out of attendance certificates, DVDs of all presentations and \$20 travelling expenses to every delegate. The team representing *Mothers of Africa* plus some nurse anaesthetists boarded a minivan bound for Phebe Hospital which they reached at about 10pm after five hours driving along a potholed road which caused at least one puncture en route. They provided anaesthesia training at Phebe for the next week as planned. Alex and I ate at a restaurant near our hotel, the main attraction of which was a large screen TV showing the England football team being beaten by France at Wembley.

Day 5

Alex and I spent all day at the AM Dogliotti Medical School lecturing to about twenty 4th year students. The start was meant to be at 9am but no-one arrived until 10am due to some misunderstanding. The final (5th) year students didn't pitch up at all perhaps because there was no role model of a medically trained anaesthetist – all anaesthesia providers in Liberia are nurses. We each gave two presentations in the morning and after lunch Alex led a session on PRIME using presentations, questions and small group discussion. I also showed several promotional videos about the work of Mercy Ships.

That night we were taken to a Chinese Restaurant by former Mercy Ships friends who were living in Monrovia with their two daughters aged 10 and 12 plus two adopted Liberian boys aged 3 and 6. They told us a heartbreaking story of an American friend in his mid 50s who is now locked up in Monrovia Central Prison, accused of sexually abusing three young Liberian girls in his care aged 11, 13 and 17 for the past two years. It must have been an extremely difficult situation for our friends, Simon and Liz (not their actual names) because Liz had

been in a Bible study group for two years with the wife. Simon in fact had confronted the man with the evidence and when he did not send the girls to a place of safety as agreed, reported him to the Liberian Police who were not interested. So he went to the American Embassy who involved senior people in the Liberian judiciary system and also a specialist investigative team based in Paris. The American citizen, (try putting *Richard Powers, Prison, Liberia* into Google) who has not actually yet been formally tried, apparently preferred to stay in prison in Monrovia rather than risk being extradited to the USA where a prisoner who had committed such crimes could be given a difficult time. Sadly it seems that post conflict Monrovia may have become a focus for people with paedophile tendencies because there are so many orphans, a legacy of AIDS and 14 years of civil war. Because of this the Liberian President banned adoption in January 2009.

Day 6

With *OJ1* driver Odecious on a generous, by Liberian standards, daily private hire rate of \$50 we first visited the Harvesters International School in an area of the town called 'red light.' The poverty stricken community got its name because it once had working traffic signals. At the school they had organised a special assembly at which I was the guest of honour and was presented with certificates and a T-shirt. The school has 300 children (fig 6) and there is another branch with a further 100.



Fig 6.
Kids at
Harvesters
school

The limited number of poorly paid teachers must each struggle with

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at least 50 kids to a class. But Pastor Gabriel Kumeh, the headmaster seemed very committed and my feeling was that the main function of the school was to keep the children off the streets during the day and to give them some education.

We then proceeded to the Agnes and Alfred Orphanage where, due to a blunder on my part, we were not expected.



Fig 7.
New girls' dormitory at the orphanage

This in a way was helpful because we saw that the girls' dormitory (fig 7), which myself and others for the past two years had been helping to fund, was almost finished. There were beds in the rooms which were not yet occupied (fig 8) – apparently about 100 USD/month was needed to pay for a matron to supervise the girls.



Fig 8.
Inside the girls' dormitory

We lunched with Odecious at a local restaurant (fig 9) of his choice called 'the Sweet Finger.'



Fig 9.
Alex outside the lunch venue

We ate a local delicacy – fufu and soup (fermented cassava dumpling, sitting in a bowl of pepper soup with chicken, beef, fish and crab claws). We then drove back to the JFK hospital to attempt to fix the non

functioning *Glostavent* Anaesthetic machine with help on the phone from Diamedica engineer Robert Neighbour (fig 10) in the UK. A faulty oxygen concentrator was eventually diagnosed.



Fig 10.
Phoning the engineer in the UK

Back at the Royal Hotel we had a meeting with Cletus Noah who worked for a charity called *Volunteers of Sean (VOS)*. Sean Devereux had worked in the village of Tapita as a school teacher for five years before he was transferred in 1993 to work near Mogadishu where he was shot dead by a Somali gunman. The BBC made a documentary film called *Mr Sean* and his parents wrote a book, *While my heart beats* and founded the Sean Devereux Foundation in his memory which continues Sean's legacy to support the education of poor children in Liberia. Cletus, one of those original children whom Sean helped more than 15 years ago is now an adult and hoping to go to college and study law. Meanwhile he is one of the *Volunteers of Sean* who are continuing the legacy left by Sean and at present are supporting 100 children who otherwise could not afford the fees to gain an education. This venture is financed by the Sean Devereux foundation based in England up to a maximum of \$125/ year /child.

That night we met up with Chantal whose mother attends the same church that I do in Ascot. She had heard a radio programme a couple of nights before about provision of anaesthesia in Liberia which mentioned our conference. She took us to *Tides*, her current favourite restaurant, which had a spectacular view over the bay

towards the Port. It was full of NGO workers and one or two important members of the local wealthy families. She told us some interesting stories such as the difficulties she and her friends experienced on a train trip to *Bong mines*. Firstly they had problems because it was alleged they did not have permission to drive their Land Rovers around and then on the return journey to Monrovia while their train was doing about 100 mph, a motorcyclist rode headlong into the side of the train. The train driver started slowing down but Chantal remembers telling him to put his foot down as there was a lynch mob gathering.

She told us that Monrovia had now become a relatively safe haven for 'Mercs' – former South African or Rhodesian mercenaries. She pointed out the impoverished slum area across the bay a group of NGOs are in a joint £30M venture to improve water and sanitation. She also knew Tim Butcher the author of the book *'Blood River'* and had helped supply logistic support for the Liberian leg of his 2009 adventure in the footsteps of Graham Greene's epic 'journey without maps' in 1932. He has now written an excellent book about his experiences entitled *'Chasing the Devil'*.

Day 7

After my usual Royal Hotel breakfast of cornflakes with chopped banana and papaya, we went to the Don Bosco school where our friend Cletus (fig 11)



Fig 11.
Cletus Noah

was speaking to a gathering of the 100 kids (fig 12) whose education was currently being sponsored by the Sean Devereux Foundation.

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Fig 12. Children sponsored by the Sean Devereux Foundation

Alex and I were both asked to say a few words of encouragement to the children (fig 13).



Fig 13. Encouraging the children

Then it was off for our undoubted highlight of the week – a visit to a house, somewhere in a suburb of Monrovia, occupied by Joshua Blahyi his wife Josie and their four children Michaela (13), Joshua (11), Janice (7) and a baby. A year ago I had been asked by a mutual friend to assist with the children's school fees.

Fifteen years before Joshua was a much feared war lord known as *General Butt Naked*. He and his 75 strong battalion of young men, many of whom were child soldiers, inflicted terrible atrocities particularly on innocent civilians when they charged into battle naked wearing only boots and carrying machine guns. They are said to have been responsible for at least 20,000 deaths. They were accused of child sacrifice, cannibalism, murder and trading blood diamonds for cocaine and weapons. In 1996 Joshua had a Damascene conversion in the heat of a battle when he experienced a blinding white vision of Christ who told him to end the killings and convert or die. He told me that immediately afterwards when he tried to fire his RPG and his guns, every single one jammed. The former tribal priest and warlord then immediately left the field of battle and went to Ghana where he trained as a Christian evangelist.

He is now responsible for a group of 22 former combatants aged between 22 and 39. He is trying to find employment for them and asked my help to fund a clay brick making machine from India which he says can produce 500 / day which would sell at 20 Liberian dollars each. He also asked me to assist him with publication of his book – a pastor friend of his in Lagos is now going to print 2000 copies to sell in Liberia.

I have to admit we found the former General a fascinating person to talk to. We did not feel menaced at all, he was the sort of guy I could easily have enjoyed a beer with (fig 14).



Fig 14. My new Liberian friend

He told me that he used to instruct his soldiers not to rob the houses of the rich as their money was kept in banks but to rob the poor who kept cash in their dwelling place.

A documentary film called the *Redemption of General Butt Naked* was shown on January 22nd 2011 at the *Sundance Film Festival* in California (one of only 50 selected out of 4000) and a feature film is also being planned. Joshua perhaps surprisingly allowed us to take photos of him and his family (fig 15).



Fig 15. Alex with Joshua and his family

I even used the bathroom off his bedroom passing en route a very normal unmade double bed.

But the question somehow still hangs over him – should he be in the Hague or should the 15 crime free years as a pastor since his conversion in 1996 count towards him being forgiven? It is an impossible call but in a way I felt it was a privilege to have met him and his family whom he obviously cared for very much.

We drove back to the Royal Hotel to meet our dinner guests Dr Lawrence Sherman and his charming wife Rose Lee. Lawrence was a general surgeon who was in charge of the medical students at the AM Dogliotti College where we had lectured two days before. He had done his specialist training in Johannesburg 10 years ago and is now one of the most respected surgeons in Monrovia operating mainly at the private Firestone Hospital. We discussed how and in which country some Liberian doctors might train as anaesthetists.

Day 8

Alex and I first of all were driven by Odecius to Redemption hospital (fig 16) to try and fix their *Glostavent* anaesthesia machine.

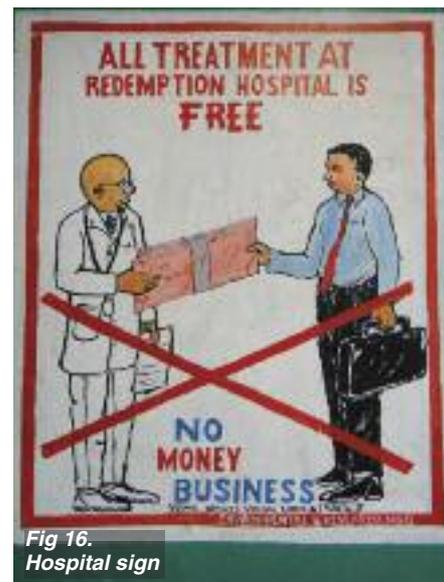


Fig 16. Hospital sign

This was successful but we are not sure that it will be used. In an adjacent operating theatre a caesarean was being performed using ketamine anaesthesia with the patient not intubated (fig 17).

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Fig 17.
C-section
under
ketamine

We arrived about 20 minutes late for the morning service at the Jamaica Road Evangelical Church which I used to visit when working on the Mercy Ship as it was within walking distance of the Port. To my embarrassment the service had not yet started as they were waiting for me to arrive. In the past I had donated some money to help build an outdoor toilet block (fig 18) so the service was in my honour!



Fig 18.
With Pastor
Joseph

The church had been well decorated and the choir were all dressed in attractive new robes (fig 19) and sang really well.



Fig 19.
Church choir

Luckily they have not yet acquired an amplification system so the volume was not too high. After the service we returned to our hotel passing several interesting road signs en route (figs 20, 21). There we met Cletus, Gabriel (from the school) and Jerome (in charge of the orphanage). We all went to lunch at a restaurant near JFK hospital, crammed into *OJ1*.



Fig 20.



Fig 21.

I discussed with Cletus whether the orphanage and the school might be eligible for some Government funding, also whether he might be prepared to visit these two institutions on a regular basis to check how things are going. The situation which concerned me was that the Government has ruled that when children reach the age of 18 they must leave the orphanage. This may be a problem if they have no family or college to go to and there must be a significant risk that they just end up 'on the street.'

After lunch Alex and I joined Mercy ships friends at the beautiful *Kendeja Hotel* about 30 min drive towards the airport from our hotel. It had an excellent swimming pool complex adjacent to a beautiful area of beach with spectacular waves both for swimming and surfing. The water was so warm – hard to remember only ten days later with the UK gripped in Arctic conditions. We were then driven by our friends through a violent thunderstorm to the airport. Our plane took off on time but made an unscheduled stop in Dakar, Senegal which resulted in my missing the intended connection in Brussels for London Heathrow.

Summary

It had been a truly remarkable week in Liberia.

The country definitely seems more upbeat than two years before. People appear more confident and less down cast, there seems to more of an atmosphere of hope. President Ellen Serleaf Johnson still seems to be generally popular although just before we arrived she sent all 12 members of her cabinet on 'Administrative Leave,' putting all the deputies in charge of their departments. She was gradually reinstating some while we were there. There is a General Election scheduled for 2011 so I just hope that this does not result in civil unrest but there are still 7000 UN troops in the country. I look forward to returning to Liberia in the not too distant future.

Feb 2011 – Making Waves

The *Africa Mercy* is on her way from South Africa to Freetown where she is scheduled to dock on the 28th February. She has spent the last few months in Durban docks having four new engines installed. The original 'harbour engines' produced unacceptable levels of noise particularly in two of the six operating rooms. This was a major engineering undertaking which involved cutting a hole in the hull to provide access for removal of the six old engines and their four replacements. After leaving



Fig 22. The
Africa Mercy
leaving
Durban

Durban (fig 22) the ship made a brief stop in Cape Town.

I return to Freetown in March, my 4th visit since 1993, to spend two weeks on board the ship. The first will be helping with the Screening (selection) of patients for surgery and the second coordinating two 3 day conferences: one for midwives and the other for anaesthetic nurses.

The ship will be in Freetown for 10 months – any potential volunteers should contact the Mercy Ships UK office on 01438 727800 or via www.mercyships.org.uk