

THE plight of those suffering in some of the world's poorest countries shocks us all, every time we see a news item or documentary on television or a heart-rending photograph. The images prompt us to dig into our pockets the next time a charity tin rattles — but **SALLY BRYANT** talked to an Ascot man, who has been doing a lot more for the last 15 years

ONE Friday night in September 1990, consultant anaesthetist Dr Keith Thomson was flying from Manchester to Heathrow when he picked up a newspaper left on the seat next to him.

The story that caught his eye was about a 'Mercy Ship' in London, preparing to take its floating operating theatres to Ghana for the first time.

Medics were needed, especially anaesthetists — and whether or not you believe in fate, that cry for help could not have fallen on better ears.

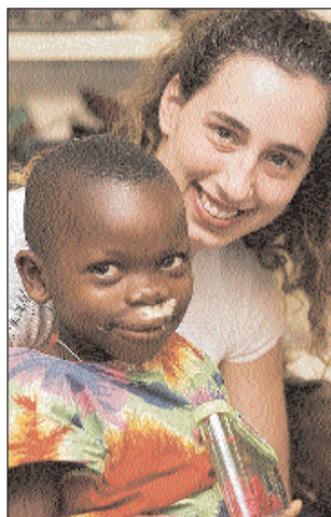
As well as having the skills required, Dr Thomson had worked in Africa and fallen in love with the country — "It gets under your skin," he said — and he had a burning desire to return.

By chance again, Dr Thomson's Monday morning appointment was cancelled, so he headed for Docklands to see the converted cruise liner Anastasis.

"I decided then I wanted to be involved," says the 57-year-old.

"Not only was it Africa, but you volunteered for two weeks and it was feasible to get away from the medical world for that time. I did not realise my wife had read the same article on the same day and she knew I would go — I filled in the forms and went out six months later."

He has been every year since, for what he calls "the best



weeks" on his calendar. From 8am until 5pm, he works in one of the ship's three theatres with one or two surgeons and two nurses performing operations that transform lives. Most poverty-stricken patients never dreamt they would be so lucky.

Most of the procedures are ones we take for granted. Dr Thomson explains: "We do a lot of facial surgery, tumours and cleft lip and palate. About one baby in 700 is born with a cleft lip, and in this country it is repaired at about a month of age.

"A lot of kids we see there have never been to school because people throw sticks at them — in Togo, babies used to be put in a box and buried alive — but the operation only takes about 45 minutes.

"There is also a lot of eye surgery done, cataracts and squints in children and congenital cataracts. When the bandages come off and a five-year-old can suddenly see, it's wonderful.

"It puts the health service here into perspective, when you look at what is available in other parts of the world. In Sierra Leone, for example, 98 per cent of the people have no access to medical care at all.

"The maternal mortality rate is the worst in the world there, with about 2,000 women dying in every 100,000. It is because of poverty — if you don't have the money, you don't get the

'My trips on the Mercy ship are the best weeks of my year'



Caesarean section you need." Dr Thomson was able to intervene in such a case in 1993, while visiting a hospital in Sierra Leone. A young woman was being left to die in agony after being in labour for four days, and he paid for her Caesarean.

Five years later, as he came out of the airport to join the ship, he saw a small child in the crowd holding a board. It read: "Uncle Keith, thank you for saving my mum's life and me. You are most welcome."

So many others, treated on a

Mercy Ship, must feel the same. The Anastasis spends up to eight months a year in West Africa and around 1,000 free operations are performed. When 'the great white ship of hope' (as it is known) docks, thousands are queuing for the selection process. They are all screened and about one in 10 will be operated on — for example, a lot of jaw tumours are seen but only those that are benign will receive surgery.

Dr Thomson says: "On my last trip, two of our nurses were supporting the families of

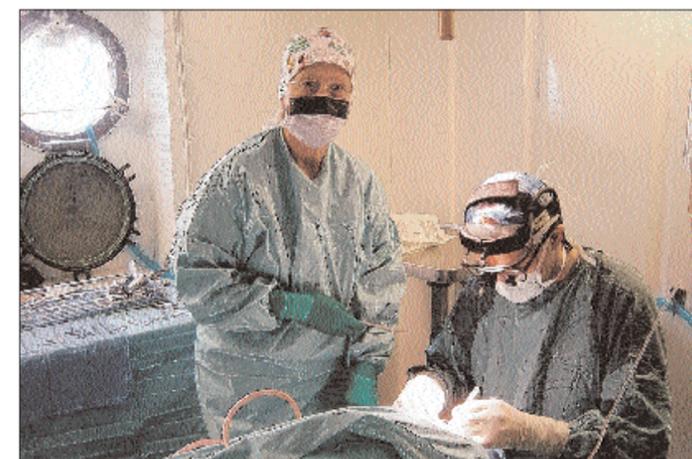
people we couldn't operate on — we are trying to help, to alleviate suffering as much as we can."

It must be rewarding, because many medics go back time and time again. Dr Gary Parker joined the ship in the late '80s for three months of cleft lip surgery — and he is still on board, he has never left.

Dr Thomson, now on the UK board of Mercy Ships, says: "I meet my old friends in the community, I meet new people and I get great pleasure out of getting new medical staff to



Above, the queue for treatment on the Anastasis; below, operating in one of the ship's theatres.



come out, because they love it." As well as paying for his own flights and daily crew fees to stay on board, the dedicated consultant puts money into a trust fund to help more poorly-paid nursing colleagues at the North Hampshire Hospital in Basingstoke share the "very intense" experience.

Dr Thomson's passion for helping the Mercy Ships has also become a family affair. His wife, Fiona, has been with him on the last three or four trips and they have spent Christmas on board with their son and daughter several times.

Despite the satisfaction of being able to transform the lives of so many, there are so many more still needing help it can be difficult to keep going. But Dr Thomson tells the story of a girl on a beach where thousands of starfish have been washed up. She throws them back in the sea one by one, and when someone points out her effort isn't making any difference, she says: "But I'm making a difference to that one, and that one...."

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MERCY Ships is an international Christian relief organisation, founded after a young woman told 19-year-old American Don Stephens of her vision of ships going in to help after disasters.

The Anastasis, the first ship, was bought in 1978. Others in the fleet are the Caribbean Mercy and the new Africa Mercy.

A crew is made up of between 70 and 80 medically-trained people and around 300 other members, from engineers to hairdressers.

As well as the free operations, crews provide health care and community development services — for example, they establish clinics and dig wells. The dentists on board also run clinics off the ship — there are hardly any dentists in West Africa.

To find out more, visit www.mercyships.org



Dr Keith Thomson