

A film star at last?!

Keith D. Thomson

**Consultant
Anaesthetist
North Hampshire
Hospital
Basigstoke**

Introduction

Helping to staff the *Mercy Ships* [1] stand at the 'One Life' exhibition at Olympia (4-5 March 2006) provided me with the opportunity of sharing some of my many experiences from sixteen visits to West Africa, encompassing nine different countries.

BBC journalist Caroline was particularly fascinated by the story of my continuing relationship with the Conteh family from Sierra Leone:

On March 17th 1993 I paid for 18-year-old Catherine to have a Caesarean section at the Princess Christian Maternity Hospital in Freetown [2]. She had been in obstructed labour for more than four days. The family had no money so the surgeon refused to operate. Catherine and her baby, subsequently called Regina, survived (fig 1).



Fig 1 Conteh family post Caesarean section in 1993

Just over 5 years later in November 1998 the family were waiting to greet me at Conakry airport in Guinea when I arrived to do another stint on board the Mercy Ship 'Anastasis'. They were now refugees having escaped by boat from the devastating civil war which raged in their country. Then in October 2000, I arranged for them to fly to the relative safety of Accra in Ghana after Augustine, the husband had been incarcerated along with thousands of other refugees for several days without food or water. This was on the orders of Guinean President Lansana Conte.



Fig 2 Conteh family in Australia Nov. 2005

After nearly five years in Ghana the family migrated in May 2005 to Wollongong in Australia (fig 2). Regina, now 5ft 9in tall, has won a scholarship to a local Catholic girls' school and Catherine already has a permanent job at the nearby *Novotel*, facilitated by the 'hospitality' training she successfully completed in Accra.

Follow up meeting

Three weeks later Caroline and I arranged to meet at Ealing Broadway station to have a talk in a local coffee shop. Her first question was: 'why had I helped Catherine?'

My reply was: 'why were you on the ground at the station entrance helping an old lady look for her lost ticket?' Most people would not have done that. I went on to say that life presents you with situations where you may have different options in how to react.

Two months later Caroline arrived at our house in Ascot in her black 2.0L Toyota MR2 to 'case the joint' for her film crew. My wife was most amused that she wanted the serious mess in one of our sheds, which masquerades as my study, to be left untouched for filming as it would seem that I was very busy!

Filming

I think this went well, the independent team were certainly extremely professional. It all took, believe it or not, over eight hours, my doctor fishing friend Mario had to wait a couple of hours but that worked

well as by the time we reached the River Avon near Amesbury the rain had ceased, no one else was there and the fish were rising!

The film crew consisted of the dreadlocked producer Steve (a great guy of Jamaican origin), a make up artist (who also doubled as the clapper board operator), a cameraman and a sound recording engineer. Much of the time was taken up by setting up all the recording equipment for each different scenario, placing various family photos and memorabilia in exactly the right place and finally ensuring the light conditions were optimal.

The make up artist spent almost 2 hours doing up Caroline's hair and face (including red lipstick to match our sofa covering) and then about 30 seconds on me! During the first interview filming was initially interrupted by me asking whether the safety pin coming out of Caroline's cleavage should be so visible, then by a loud buzzing fly, next by an aeroplane flying overhead and finally by the loud ring tone of the producer's mobile.

The Interview

I was asked various questions by Caroline like: 'How did you get involved with Mercy Ships? How does your work on the Mercy Ship differ from what you do at the North Hampshire Hospital? What happened on March 17th 1993? Tell me the story of the 'starfish.' Tell me about your illness last year and

how the Conteh's helped. When you go to Australia in the autumn what are you planning to do?'

Apparently I did not 'um' at all during my answers which they said was unusual. I answered the same questions several times both in our sitting room and in the garden. Interestingly each time I gave a slightly different answer which I suppose was the idea. There were three other scenes which were filmed: firstly Caroline and I repeatedly walking together about 50m from the front gate to the house having an animated but not recorded conversation; secondly my wife Fiona bringing me a cup of tea while I open an email sent by Catherine Conteh from Australia and finally Fiona and I welcoming Caroline at the front door.

I only embarrassed myself once and that was when they were filming Caroline putting on various facial expressions. She was having problems laughing so I told her a rather

dubious 'laddish' limerick about 'a young man called Dave' – this caused a degree of mirth all round and she said I cannot believe you said that!

Caroline is going to Melbourne soon to start a Masters degree. She is intending to contact the Conteh family to arrange a meeting. The final scenario is for the reunion of my wife Fiona and myself with the Conteh family to be filmed at Sydney airport sometime in the autumn.

References

1. Mercy Ships UK, The Lighthouse, 12, Meadway Court, Stevenage, Herts SG1 2EF, Tel: 0870 870 7447 Website: www.mercyships.org.uk
2. Thomson KD. Sun, sea but not much sux in Sierra Leone. *Today's Anaesthetist* 1993; 8: 160-161.



An African Adventure?

- **Use** your medical skills to transform lives
- **Work** on a Mercy Ship in West Africa
- **Be** part of the anaesthesia team on board
- **Give** your time for two weeks or more

Contact:

Dr Keith Thomson FRCA – keith.t2@ukonline.co.uk

www.mercyships.org.uk

Anaesthetic providers required October 2006 – February 2007 in Ghana (March–December 2007 in Liberia) for maxillofacial, ophthalmic, orthopaedic, plastic and vesicovaginal fistula repair surgery in a caring Christian environment.