

## Switch On at Ndirande

November 2007

On hot, stormy days in November, we visited the Malawi clinics in the Twinning of Scottish and Malawian Clinics Project and witnessed the installation of Internet and computer facilities at several of the clinics. The provision of the same, or better, technology as we enjoy in Scotland, will enable our Malawi partners to communicate on an equal platform.

Ndirande Clinic is one of ten Malawi clinics twinned with ten Scottish health centres. The clinic is part of a sprawling township in Blantyre with a patient population of over 100, 000 and staffed by a team of health surveillance assistants, registered nurses and clinical officers. There are no resident doctors. The twin clinic in Scotland, Stockbridge (Blue) Practice, is in an affluent part of the capital city with 8, 000 patients and five GP partners.



Both Scotland and Malawi enjoy access to free healthcare at the point of delivery. In Malawi, Health Ministry clinics provide the backbone of primary, public health and maternity services in urban townships and rural population centres. Empowering student nurses and experienced midwives in small clinics aims to send ripples of

good medical practice through the wider patient and guardian community.

Our 'Day in the Life' at Ndirande was special. Malawi colleagues, Sylvester Chawala and Paul Nkhoma had prepared for the visit by establishing relationships of trust with staff at Ndirande and our lynchpin between Scotland and Malawi, Pam Wilson VSO, provided an unrivalled insight into medical training and student nurse placement in the clinic network. The Malawi Health Ministry has a very clear policy for health care delivery, with a clear chain of command, and we recognised the need to gain the respect and trust of the District Health Officers (DHOs) in the districts where our clinics are located.

Globe Internet Ltd are contracted to undertake the installing of computer infrastructure. Harry and Avinash from Globe arrived in their familiar transit van with beaming, proud smiles and brandishing drills, hammers and bundles of flex. While the men got to work on locating a strong signal from a receptor on one of the Blantyre hills, we listened to clinical officer, Francis, and nurses, Miriam and Lucy, talk of their voluntary counselling and testing (VCT) in the community, of youth services delivery at the clinic and the challenges of delivering babies in the labour ward during a power cut. We shared in some of their enthusiasm for making the lives of local people better. All the while the long, snaking line of outpatients, clutching their health passport documents at the pharmacy counters, gradually lessened; the 'guardian' family members stirred large vats of nsima outside in the midday sun and resilient young mothers hushed crying toddlers.

The emergence of the Internet as the dominant source of educational support in both the developed and the developing world has nurtured a culture and understanding of global health issues. Social networking and more formalised institutional links are gradually raising awareness of the need to appreciate the shared ambitions of health professionals worldwide. The Twinning Project was established in the belief that increasing co-operation between different health care systems should be a two-way dialogue of support rather than a one-way flow of aid. Just as technology companies can learn practical solutions emerging from resource poor countries, so too can health care professionals learn innovative ways of reconnecting with patient autonomy, health education in the community and family support, from their colleagues.

The 'donor and recipient' model is an uneasy premise for any lasting friendship. One way aid donation is not only ineffective, it can have a detrimental effect on Malawi by encouraging dependency, corruption and replicating systems of inappropriate training. It was sad to see computer cables and wires dangling from storage room cabinets at Ndirande - discarded and without power - a souvenir of previous misguided goodwill from another NGO that had undermined the trust of clinical staff. It is crucial that we don't repeat the same mistakes.

Ndirande is fortunate to be twinned with a team of enthusiastic doctors, nurses and management at the Stockbridge Medical Practice. Their global outlook and existing experience of international partnerships should help realise the potential for sharing expertise and skills. In the longer term, the

twinned link could propel links between neighbouring clinics and regional institutions inside Malawi, in addition to encouraging international friendships. Funding to provide Internet access allows staff to share resources and continuous professional development with peers and, in turn, increase the in-country knowledge of Malawi clinicians. This may decrease the exodus of trained staff from Malawi.

At the moment of 'switch on', all the members of staff crowded around the unfamiliar flashing computer screen and jostled for a view. The computer was a high specification laptop computer and better than any used in Scottish clinics. We discussed using the Internet for accessing the world's free medical library, checking medical references and sharing clinical problems, whilst respecting patient confidentiality. It was a privilege to watch clinicians send their very first email and, in some cases, spread their hands over a keyboard for the first time. Sylvester Chawala and Paul Nkhoma have continued to support staff in their training since we left.



Health care in Malawi is under-resourced and professional training in short supply. Patients die needlessly due to lack of adequate medical facilities. But we hope that, in time, we can look to our colleagues in Malawi to help us re-connect with the core values of general practice in our own country and help us restore professional

pride in caring for patients. A donation of twenty computers from Glasgow City Council is currently en route through Africa and is due to arrive in January. With this generous support, we can scale up early progress. Together, as virtual colleagues, we click.

Join us at

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and*

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