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A personal reflection on a trip to Rwanda

Shyira, Rwanda a remote village 6000 feet above sea level in east-central Africa. The beautiful and rugged, volcanic landscape belies the devastation which shattered this area in 1994. During the 100 day genocide an estimated 1,000,000 people lost their lives, many of them were professionals; those who survived fled the country for safety. With no role models and expertise the people struggled for survival on a day to day basis.

In January 2008, I had an opportunity of experiencing life in the remote village of Shyira, an encounter which would change my life.

The purpose of the trip was to work in the maternity hospital along side the nurses who care for the women, at that time there were no midwives within the maternity unit. My aim was to provide hands-on care and observational learning opportunities for the staff.

As an experienced midwife of 20 years and an Advanced Life Support in Obstetrics (ALSO) instructor I felt I was in a good position to offer practical and effective help particularly in the areas of resuscitation, which I identified early on in the trip, needed some up-dating. Importantly only basic equipment was required, the hospital had some, the remainder I took with me and would leave as a gift from a local Neonatal unit.

The trip had been planned for nearly 12 months with numerous discussions about what the conditions, food, accommodation and general practice would be like to try and prepare me. Having never been anywhere like this before it came as a bit of a shock, particularly the amount of equipment I needed just for my own health and well being. A first aid kit to rival many hospital supply cupboards was essential. Unlike other trips if I forgot anything, there would not be any local shop to go and buy supplies. It was during the planning that I decided to keep a reflective journal during the visit.

The project I was going to has been established since 2000 when a group of people from St Luke's church in Formby made links with the diocese in Shyira. Jane Morgan, Head of Midwifery at Edge Hill University (and my manager) visited the original maternity unit and was devastated by the poverty and conditions. She was driven to help and vowed to raise the money needed to rebuild the unit, a sum of £24,000. The money was raised through various events organised by the church. Jane however, said she would never return to Rwanda due to the effects the trip had on her. In 2004 the project was complete and against her initial beliefs Jane returned to Shyira to see the opening of the unit a decision she would never regret.

The remote hospital which serves the local population, is a one hour drive to the nearest town down a steep and often treacherous road or an hour's walk down an equally steep path to the nearest market. Having

traversed this route I have every admiration for the people's stamina and resourcefulness who attend this hospital for care.

Despite all the meetings nothing could really prepare me for the emotional roller coaster which I experienced over the next two weeks. There were many highs but unfortunately some extreme lows with the losses of mothers and neonates during labour.

The following excerpts from my journal captured some of those moments.

20/1/08 "electricity on maybe an emergency in the hospital but at least I got chance to write up my journal".

21/01/08 "the elation of electricity last night had a sad consequence. The generator was on for an emergency caesarean section unfortunately both the mother and baby died ? due to the complications of a spinal anaesthesia".

23/01/08 "the baby from the 21st still not feedinghe is basically starving in front of our eyes. Weight loss since birth 30%".

"the woman was in bed covered in blood after a caesarean section.....her catheter bag had leaked so the staff had used her own wash bowl to put the catheter bag in rather than changing it".

24/01/08 [same baby from the 21st] "baby looks toxic, sunken eyes totally dehydrated and had had a fit during the night".

As any midwife can imagine my frustration was overwhelming and I started to wonder how I could help and if anything I did would really make a difference in such a short time. One of the most important lessons I learnt from this extraordinary experience is how you cannot transfer your own thoughts and beliefs into a totally different country and culture. The trip has made me aware that despite all the benefits we experience in the UK, no matter how basic provision is, it can still provide adequate care for women and their babies.

During the trip I worked as part of a team of three midwives (myself, Jane Morgan and Lesley Briscoe) who cared for women and their babies antenatally, intranatally and postnatally using limited resources and equipment. We tended to their basic needs which appeared to be lacking, although, I am unsure why women do not have much postnatally care, it may be linked to the culture or the fact that they are cared for by nurses who do not understand the importance of postnatal care. Our hope was by setting an example we could demonstrate the impact basic care can have on the recovery of postnatal women.

Along with helping practically in the hospital I also had an opportunity to support the economy through Rwanda's only export, tourism. I followed in the footsteps of Dian Fossey whose outstanding work highlighted the plight of the mountain gorillas. The Volcano National Park is an area of untouched natural

beauty and is home to 10 Rwandan mountain gorilla families. The payment for the trip facilitates protection of the gorillas from poachers who have devastated their numbers during and post-genocide. Fortunately due to the outstanding work of Dian Fossey the numbers in Rwanda are starting to rise. This extraordinary experience offered me an opportunity to get as close as a meter away from these magnificent animals. In reality 7 meters is supposed to be the closest distance but our gorilla family decided otherwise and in return we were gifted some astonishing shots of them and fantastic memories.

How can I sum up my trip, it has been awe-inspiring and humbling. I knew that I was privileged with good health and education but, like many, I did not fully appreciate the benefits of it until now. By giving a little of my time and knowledge to those less privileged I have been rewarded with kindness, gratitude and genuine appreciation. Although I have never considered working in a developing country before I now realise the rewards are outstanding. Despite the basic conditions and all the challenges I genuinely felt at home in Shyira. The people and location have a magical quality which is difficult to quantify. They celebrate at every opportunity as life is precious and they are very aware of how easily it can be taken away.

Rwanda and its people have come along way since 1994, the wounds are starting to heal and glimmers of normality are emerging. The people need financial and practical help to sustain their continuing progress.

Although I have now returned to my regular life the experience has changed me forever, the people of Shyira have touched my heart and part of me will always be with them. I look forward to my next visit.

Anyone wishing to find out more about Shyira and how you can help can contact www.shyiratrust.org.uk or e-mail shyira@shyiratrust.org.uk