

UPDATE FROM Rtn Dr Jim McWHIRTER – KAMULI HOSPITAL



"I was nervous setting out on my third visit to Kamuli – it seems a very long time since I was here last August. In fact life has been so busy at home recently with the fundraising dinner followed by giving a presentation at the Rotary District Conference, that I almost feel as though I am coming for a rest and to escape emails and the telephone! After a tense half hour on the M4 stuck in an accident traffic jam, the journey was uneventful. The welcome was very warm, as always, and all seemed much as usual except that we soon discovered shortages are far worse than usual due to a delay in the arrival of the Government grant which was due in January – there are no IV fluids, dressings, gloves and very few drugs. Patients have to purchase these items in the town so that they can receive treatment. In one case where a patient had no money and needed immediate lifesaving surgery, a midwife personally gave £8 (10% of her monthly salary) to buy the fluids and gloves needed for her to go to theatre. When I later discovered this I broke my self imposed rule of not getting involved in individual financial support and reimbursed the nurse and later bought more fluids to treat her life threatening postoperative complications.

The emotional pain of seeing the needless waste of human life is, if anything, more intense than on my first visit. The shock is giving way to anger at the injustice and a greater determination to do what I can to help. This was reinforced on the day after we arrived (Sunday) which I decided to spend going round with Dr Matovu, the Medical Superintendent. As usual he began on the children's ward at 6am followed by ward rounds on surgical, medical and then maternity where we were informed that a patient we had seen on surgical only half an hour before had subsequently died – in UK she would have been in intensive care and survived. On this visit we are a team of three – nurse Jill Brooks who came last year, midwife Gillian Pearce on her first visit and me. It is great to have their support. Sadly the local staffing situation is difficult – they are losing 21 of their 80 nurses who are moving on to better paid Government jobs. Mercifully they will be replaced by nurses from the training school who will finish in May but the high turnover and loss of experienced staff does not help patient care.

On the positive side the maternity ward has received five incubators from the Rotary Club of Kampala North. The hospital is cooperating with a community project to reduce maternal and infant mortality by improving antenatal care which is being led by John Hopkins University, USA. Jill Brooks is conducting research in cooperation with Prof Paul Matts of London University investigating the use of a simple water purification system to prepare affordable fluids suitable for wound cleaning. As usual it was a relief to discover that I had not lost all my newly acquired obstetric skills and to get a couple of Caesarean sections done successfully.

A variety of laboratory equipment was air freighted out thanks to help from Philip Tytler, a BA pilot who offered his personal charity concession to enable it to be sent at low cost. It arrived safely at Entebbe and is being sorted out in the lab and will soon be in use. Our film makers, Josephine and Phil Malone, arranged for a low cost solar light which has been developed in Nairobi to be delivered by a friend. This will be tried out and should help with power cuts and saving on the use of very expensive electricity. With support from Paul Darrall of Scottish and Southern Electric, Charles Swainson and local electrician, Dan, I have finally satisfied myself that we have a good plan for generators to protect the hospital's vital functions during power cuts. The next step is to place an order for generators and decide if that is best done in the UK or Kampala. All this is possible because of the very generous support so many of you have given over the past year. It is very exciting to be of some small help to the staff here who work so hard in such adverse conditions. Thank you all for making it possible.

On Tuesday we briefly visited the local boys' primary school to deliver pen-pal letters and good wishes from the primary schools in Nettlebed and Brightwell-cum-Sotwell (Jim & Jill's local schools in UK) which have decided to set up a link with St Pius here. We were warmly received and will return next week to find out how they would like to spend the £150 that has been collected.

Jim McWhirter Easter Monday, 5 April 2010"