

GASOC Keith Thomson Travel Grant Report

Lydia Longstaff in Madagascar

I was awarded a GASOC Keith Thomson Travel Grant to contribute to a year of working voluntarily as a surgeon in remote, rural Madagascar.

Hopitaly Vaovao Mahafaly (Good News Hospital) in Mandritsara is a Christian mission hospital in Northern Madagascar, serving a population of 250,000 people and providing the only surgical provision for a 200km radius. The hospital is truly remote – by road, it is a 2-3 day journey from the capital Antananarivo – and most of the surrounding population are subsistence rice farmers.



I am working here for a year 'out of programme' from my General Surgery Registrar training, joining the small surgical team at the hospital.

The work of our team is truly broad, crossing multiple surgical sub-specialities - including General Surgery (emergency laparotomies, hernias etc), Paediatrics (more hernias, cleft lips), Urology (lithiasis, nephrectomies, ureter reimplantations), Plastics (wounds, burns, tendon repairs, skin grafts), Gynaecology (miscarriages, hysterectomies, obstetric fistula), Obstetric (caesareans, ectopics, post-partum haemorrhage), Vascular (trauma, amputations), ENT (thyroids, deep neck abscesses) and Orthopaedic (fractures, osteomyelitis, amputations).

In addition to the hugely broad range of experience I am gaining here, I have also expanded my exposure to pathologies not seen in my usual UK practice, such as Typhoid small bowel perforations and Schistosomiasis-related urological problems. Many patients present with very advanced pathology due to their limited health care access, so managing their conditions can be challenging and require



inventiveness and creativity. Patients commonly travel for days on foot or by ox-cart to reach the hospital; it is humbling and inspiring to be part of the team that they have come to see.



The hospital functions remarkably with limited resources. We close abdomens with a sterilised fishing line and use mosquito netting as hernia mesh. For some months of the year, we have running water for just one hour each day. Imaging options are x-ray or ultrasound, and with no ultrasonographers, basic abdominal ultrasound is a new skill that I have quickly learned. Our basic range of lab tests has a limited supply of reagents, so as clinicians we must truly consider if a test is necessary to inform a patient's treatment. Economy and efficiency are vital.

One of the very exciting parts of my time here so far is coming at the time of a new surgical training programme starting here in Mandritsara [PAACS]. It is genuinely a joy and mutual learning process to work and serve alongside Malagasy doctors in their surgical training. Their commitment to learning and improving is inspiring, and the training programme here will continue to help meet the surgical needs of the population for years to come. It is great to be part of a project that is working so hard to care for patients now and also looks to positively impact the future of surgical care in Madagascar.

What are some of the things that I have learned here so far? Technically, I have learnt new skills such as abdominal ultrasound, caesarean sections and ureteric reimplantation. I have honed clinical judgement and decision-making, and have increased my appreciation for the systems and resources of UK healthcare. I have learned new depths about the importance of communicating with patients from the

starting point of their own understanding. When talking with patients in my broken attempts at Malagasy language and through translators – usually from a basis of very basic anatomy and physiology - I have used many diagrams and pictures to help patients and their family members to understand their operations and disease processes. Relationally, I have learnt that a committed, compassionate and genuinely supportive team are absolute gold. I hope that I can always strive to replicate my part in creating and sustaining such a team wherever I may be working. In all of these things, I have seen new depths to the truth - for all of us who work in healthcare - that to be with people



that to be with people

in their suffering and to offer compassionate care and hope alongside our work, is a joy and very great privilege.

I am grateful for the contribution from the GASOC Keith Thomson Travel Grant to help enable my time here in Madagascar. For those who are interested, I have a blog: [https:// Lydinmadagascar2022.blogspot.com](https://Lydinmadagascar2022.blogspot.com)