

DAVID GORDON MEMORIAL HOSPITAL, LIVINGSTONIA, MALAWI

I have always been interested in international medicine and in particular nursing in Africa. When I entered into my second year at the University of Southampton I knew that for my Professional Development Experience (PDE) I would return to Africa. Through the university I heard about a charity called AMECA. AMECA offer bursaries to medical and nursing students who want to do electives in African hospitals. I was lucky enough to be successful with an application for a bursary. I am so grateful to the charity as it enabled me to have an incredible experience.

Using AMECAs database of hospitals I chose the David Gordon Memorial Hospital. From my research I found that the hospital consisted of four main wards: male, female, paediatrics and maternity. The photos illustrated that the hospital was situated on a plateau overlooking Lake Malawi. I contacted the hospital directly and asked if they would be happy to have me there for an elective. I received a very enthusiastic email back, saying that they would love to have me. So the excitement began.



I flew into Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi, and proceeded to make my way up north to the hospital. My first impression of Malawi was that everyone was so very friendly. People were quite happy to stop and talk to me on the street even if we'd never met before. This continued throughout my trip; I was always welcome and people were always interested in me.



During my time in Livingstonia I stayed in the Stone House, a guest house dating back to 1894 and part of the original mission. It was a great place to stay. I was made to feel very at home by the staff there. I learnt how to make some typical Malawian dishes by getting involved in the kitchen.

My first day at the hospital began with morning devotions; hymns, prayers and a sermon all in the local language. This was a great experience and I felt very honoured to be able to join them in this ritual. Following this I was given an introduction to the wards by the matron. The wards were basic but not as

insufficient as I was expecting. One thing that struck me was the drug trolleys – medications were emptied into handwritten pots, with no expiry dates and not always a dose written on the pot. The availability of medications was also a challenge for the staff working at the hospital. As medications were not always available some patients went without or had to have a less suitable substitute.



Most of my time at the hospital was spent on the female ward, as it was the busiest ward with some very poorly patients. Patient's vital signs were not always completed regularly; with some patients going a couple of days without having them taken. I found this quite frustrating as in the UK vital signs are done regularly with no exception. It was not until I found a patient with a blood pressure of 50/30 that a number of staff realised the importance of the observations. Due to this incident I was able to teach some of the staff how to use a manual blood pressure machine. It was great to be able to have an influence in the healthcare provided in Africa.



Other than work in the wards I had the opportunity to go on outreach visits. I partook in an under 5s and antenatal clinic. I was able to get involved in measuring expecting mothers BP and weight. I was also able to watch immunisations being given to the children and family planning talks. There were also doctors outreach visits. One that I went on could only be reached by boat. It was

an incredible experience travelling on Lake Malawi. It just goes to show how we take our transport systems for granted. I can't ever imagine having to get a boat to go to hospital!

I also had the opportunity to spent time in theatre. There I saw multiple operations; ranging from a caesarean section to a total abdominal hysterectomy. The operating theatre seemed very different to that of the UK – it was not all shiny and super sterilised, however it was clean and useable.

When I wasn't at the hospital I was able to explore the plateau and get involved in the local community. I climbed Chombe Mountain and visited the waterfalls. I also went to church early on Sunday mornings, watched local football matches, went to a

choir festival etc. I made the most of my time in Livingstonia and had the best experience ever.

Following my three weeks volunteering at the hospital I travelled down south along the Lake. This was a totally different but equally great experience. I spent time relaxing and doing touristy things – swimming to an island and snorkelling, going on a game and boat safari, eating in local restaurants etc.

My time in Malawi was amazing I learnt a lot about myself and about people in general. We are so very lucky in the UK; we have sufficient supplies and infrastructure that enable us to have an accessible and functional health service. Our health is so important and I have seen firsthand how quickly it can be taken away. My experience in Malawi has given me skills that I can take into my future nursing practice to make be a better nurse.

