

OWL – Branching into Health

Helena White, April 2017

OWL was established some thirty years ago with the initial purpose of forming friendships between two countries. Over the years this has grown, developed and expanded to achieve some great things. The development of Bo town council into a dynamic and forward thinking department achieving incredible things in waste management and town development planning inspired the education link to strive for closer relationships and continue the incredible work with the school children culminating in the amazing annual 'Day of the African child'.

As a seemingly natural progression OWL is now looking to establish a health link with the people of Bo. Continuing in the spirit of support and friendship I was asked to investigate the possibility of this idea on my recent visit.

My name is Helena White and I am a community midwife based at Warwick hospital. I run my own charity – The African Maternity Link – and have a very similar ethos to OWL. We raise money to send midwives to Sierra Leone to teach and update the midwives in practical skills and evidence based knowledge. Our Link was established in 2012 and up until now we have provided our training and workshops in Freetown but were looking to extend our scope of work when OWL asked me to make this visit to Bo.

We found that Bo has an excellent general hospital which has, by all accounts, improved greatly over the past few years. We found the hospital clean, tidy and well run but enthusiastic and knowledgeable staff. We were particularly pleased to note that the Medical Superintendent is an obstetrician! There is a neo natal unit with an expanding paediatric unit where we observed staff being given up to date training by a nurse from the main referral hospital – Ola During (you may have seen it on Comic Relief) in Freetown. Care in this hospital 'free' – meaning very basic care is free, many things still need to be paid for. They have a busy delivery suite with over 130 deliveries a month with minimal but friendly and hardworking staff.

OWL asked us if we would visit Bo Children's Hospital – a 'not for profit' unit on the edge of the town. BCH is currently supported by Rotary International and was set up by Dr Lemoh, a native Sierra Leonean, to offer further support for the children of Bo.



It has two wards, one for acute patients with 12 beds and one for recovering patients with 8 beds. It has an isolation unit which is actually unusual in Sierra Leone but absolutely crucial in view of the recent Ebola epidemic, a basic lab for diagnostics, an x-ray and ultrasound machine that have only intermittent use due to the unreliable electricity supply. However, this is currently being addressed and they are purchasing new batteries for the solar panels and are in receipt of a new generator.

We met with Mr Wusu Sannoh, hospital director and former Mayor of Bo, and Dr Sombie paediatrician in charge. Both gentlemen were delightful and obviously felt passionately about the future of the hospital. Our discussions focused mainly on the possible uses for the funds collected by Owl over the Christmas period and where it would be most effective. Mr Sannoh is keen for a new IT system for the hospital to maintain accurate patient and financial records and Dr Sombie would like to see improvements to the lab for quicker and more accurate diagnostics. On our return to the UK we met with Jayne Blackley – director for development for Warwick hospital and SWFT – who has very kindly said that she would investigate the possibility of producing a very basic modular programme for BCH needs which may enable remaining funds to be spent on much needed lab equipment. These discussions are still ongoing and I will keep you informed of any developments.

As BCH has ongoing support we felt that OWL would be better placed to start a Link with a much smaller unit where relationships can be built and support is very much needed.

OWL committee member – Theresa Bangali's daughter works as a State Enrolled Community Health Nurse (SECHN) at Yemoh Town Peripheral Health Unit (PHU) just outside Bo town centre and we were asked to go and see the centre and meet the health team working there.



This small PHU serves a community of approximately 17,000, conducts just under 1,000 deliveries and year and cares for around 2,500 children under 5. They run on skeleton staff – a Community Health Officer, Mr Lansana Deen, 2 trainee CHO's, 2 SECHN's and other untrained staff. There are no trained midwives here.

With an unreliable 'push' rather than 'pull' procurement system support from the Government is at best sporadic but rarely adequate for the needs of the community and we are now beginning to see malnourished children requiring administration of 'Plumpynut' for the first time. This system leads to over provision of drugs/equipment not required and a lack of essential lifesaving drugs such as Misoprostal or Syntocinon to stop obstetric haemorrhage.

A Government initiative was set up to improve the structure of PHU's and so construction started on a new block for Yemoh Town. Unfortunately the funding then stopped resulting in a half built building – walls and a roof – that is being used for children's clinics. The main part of the existing building is serviceable but an upgrade of basic equipment is desperately needed e.g. a new delivery bed – see picture!

This bed – propped up at one end – had had three labouring women on the previous day.



During our visit we discussed many aspects of the running of this small unit including the possibility of forming a link with OWL. We reiterated that the link is for sharing of skills and support, not for financial assistance or supply of large amounts of equipment. This was completely understood and we felt that just the suggestion of friendship and support was enough to lift their spirits and inspire them to improve things where they could e.g. asking a local carpenter if he would make a delivery bad with four legs to replace the one with three!

Sierra Leone is one of the most hazardous places in the world to have a child. Women have a 1:21 chance of dying in childbirth and 25% of children don't make it to their 5th birthday. By sharing our skills and offering friendship and support where we can, we can improve these statistics and improve the healthcare for the people of Bo.



For more information about our charity please go to

www.theafricanmaternitylink.co.uk