

Tanzania – more than an experience

Aoifé Kenny

Third year student
Dunedin School of Medicine
University of Otago

Aoifé Kenny is a third year medical student at the University of Otago Medical School. Her ultimate goal is to use her medical training in emergency and/or development settings.

A friend of mine invited me to “write about your trip to Tanzania”. With so many stories and experiences I wanted to share I believed that penning a short piece would be reasonably straight forward. I didn’t realise how difficult it would be for me to put my thoughts into words. It is not an experience that I had; it is a part of who I am now. It is in me. Like the persistent red dirt that remains in the stitches of my clothes, Africa will never leave me.

Currently I am reading a book called “Emergency Sex (and other desperate measures)”. One of the authors is a young doctor called Andrew from New Zealand. At the moment in the story he has been working in Cambodia with the Red Cross for so long he thinks the Medical Council has removed him from their records. He wanted to get away from academic medicine and hospital hierarchy. He wanted to be a “real doctor”, in the middle of nowhere, where he was desperately needed. Other people admire him for making a difference “with his bare hands”. He is also respected for knowing the people of Cambodia, living with them, being their friend. Andrew reminded me a lot of the couple that we lived with in Tanzania. Tom and Fiona Gibson are a doctor and nurse team doing a two year Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) assignment. They are stationed in Huruma Designated District Hospital and live in the village



of Mkuu in the district of Rombo, 1500m up Mt Kilimanjaro. Their assignment is focused on the development of the local hospital and the skills of healthcare workers. This is on top of their clinical work. Although hailing from New Zealand, they speak Swahili, shop in the local market like everyone else, and seem to understand the real situation of the people. They are admired and deeply respected. To a certain degree, I can also relate to Andrew. I want to make a difference, and chose Medicine as my means of doing so. Maybe I am being naïve, or even arrogant, thinking that it is possible. Whatever the case, I am going to try and Tanzania concreted that goal.

Thanks to Tom and Fiona I gained a lot of clinical experience and knowledge. Having only just finished my second year at Otago medical school, I had no 'hands on experience' with patients. Just weeks after finishing my second year exams, here I was, examining people at the HIV clinic, seeing births, and all scrubbed up helping drill a pin through a man's tibia! Ward rounds, x-ray discussions, weird and far progressed conditions. It was a great experience for me and the other two medical students. The lack of diagnostic 'machinery' showed us that we rely on it far too much in the Developed World. Developing good clinical skills, always making time to think clearly, confidence, and trust in your judgement were just some of the lessons gained.

What we learnt about the local people and society in general was invaluable. The majority of those living on the mountain are subsistence farmers, meaning that they eat what they grow. There is some trading done, however most people would not have any money. Forget about living "under \$US1 a day". And yet they were the happiest people I have ever met. The women especially amazed me. They worked on the shamba (small plot of land), carried loads as heavy as themselves up the mountain and raised large families without complaint. They lived for their children. They were so strong. To look in their eyes was to be inspired. Such a simple connection helped me to understand that we are all in essence the same. I watched a mother caress her child's head as her husband was told that his child was dying. The one-year-old's twin was gazing at the nurse, then at her sister. In that moment I saw the value of life and the fight for it. I once heard the phrase "life is cheap in Africa". Life is always precious.

My hosts' assignment was based around development and not aid; this is in line with all VSA projects. It's not just the "giving a man a fish vs. teaching him how to fish" concept; it's more than that. We cannot, as people wanting to help, go into a place and try or expect to change everything. That is very self-righteous. Why is it that we think we have it all spot-on? I believe now that development is about sharing ideas and methods with the sharing going both ways. We all have much to teach each other. The people I met taught me the strength of the human spirit, to relax and take things slowly, and how vital it is to look after one another. I saw pure compassion, true fear, and the real meaning of empathy. They even have a word expressing empathy "pole" (pol-ay); there is no English translation, not surprisingly.

The smallest children also had a boiled egg. We could only find 120 eggs in the village the evening before, so only the neediest children got one.

We can all do our bit. As Mother Teresa said "Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person". My partner, Tim, and the other 'non-medics' spent their time teaching children in the hospital English, tutoring nursing students on how to use computers, and creating a data base for the funding of the Tumaini centre for orphans. Although this group was young with all of them in their early twenties, even their limited time in the area resulted in a tangible difference.

The most inspiring moment of my time in Tanzania was a Christmas food delivery to 200 plus Tumaini children. They all received 6kg of maize and a bar of soap as a present from us. As they waited patiently and quietly in line we gave them a doughnut-like snack to munch on. And the smallest children also had a boiled egg (we could only find 120 eggs in the village the evening before, only the neediest children got one). Such simple gifts, and so greatly appreciated. I have never felt so humbled. The children had nothing, some slept in trees, and yet they were well behaved, kind, and happy. We played in the church's dirt courtyard before they headed off with their precious load atop their beautiful heads. I have so many amazing memories of that day, ask me some time.

'Tumaini' means 'hope' and that was the children's gift to me. Nothing is a lost cause. And if we try, really give it all we have, who knows what we can achieve in friendship and partnership.

[For more information on the Tumaini Project please contact me on aoife.kenny@myself.com]

