



*Mercy Ships volunteer nurse, Liz Irwin from the North Shore, cradles three-year old Siadhatu, as she recovers from an operation that restored her sight.*

## BRINGING HEAL

*Kiwi volunteer nurses with Mercy Ships talk about what motivates their work and its rewards.*

*By Sharon Walls*

**S**ierra Leone, West Africa: Every year around 750 nurses from all over the world volunteer with Mercy Ships. The organisation provides free health care to West Africa's poorest nations via the world's largest non-governmental hospital ship, the *Africa Mercy*. It is Mercy Ships fourth ship in its 33-year history. At any one time, 80 nurses are on board. These dedicated volunteers give two weeks to several months of service, working in the theatres, paediatric, ophthalmic, recovery and post-operative wards, intensive care unit, admissions, providing palliative care and in the crew clinic.

The director of nursing for the *Africa Mercy* is Alison Brieseman. The Wellingtonian has worked in the operating theatres onboard Mercy Ships since 2005. "Using my skills to bring such massive change to the poorest and most desperate, to help those who have no hope, is an amazing privilege," she said.

The ship arrived in Sierra Leone in February and from then until September, the international volunteer surgical teams, under Brieseman's leadership, have performed 1243 procedures for Sierra Leone's poor.

### **Injustice is nurse's motivation**

North Shore nurse Liz Irwin has volunteered short term in the *Africa Mercy* post-anaesthesia care unit, in the West African nations of Benin, Togo and now Sierra Leone. "My motivation in returning to the ship three years in a row is about injustice. It is wrong that a child born with a cleft lip and palate in West Africa can spend their whole life with a physical deformity, simply because they cannot afford the surgery,

or the medical skills are not available. I enjoy being part of an organisation that helps right that wrong. It is not just about us sailing into port then taking our skills away with us when we leave, but also the investment we make to local doctors and nurses who come on board. We have the opportunity to teach and train them," she said.

Melanie Schulze from Warkworth is also on her third tour of duty as a theatre nurse. "The atmosphere of the community on the ship is incredible. Four hundred people all working together from 40 different nations for one purpose – it is unlike any other place I've ever been. I was struck initially by the attitude and motivation of the crew for the work we do, and the love it is done with."

Operating theatre nurse Glenys Gillingham spent 25 years nursing in jungle hospitals in Zambia and the Congo. After a few years, she grew tired of life back in New Zealand and wanted to help people on a bigger scale. She joined the permanent staff of the Mercy Ships ophthalmic team in 2006, when many nurses her age would be considering retirement.

"This is just a little corner of Africa, and the plight of these people with little clean water, health care, education or decent housing is duplicated thousands of miles in any given direction," she said.

From February to September this year, the ophthalmic team has provided 4126 eye evaluations or treatments, and 460 cataract and other surgeries to adults, children and babies suffering with sight issues and blindness.

Julie Murphy, a nurse from the North Shore,

is volunteering for the first time. Coming to the end of her three-month stint, she said it would be easy to become overwhelmed by the suffering, poverty and great need of these people, "especially when they have travelled so far and have such hope that we can 'cure' them. It is humbling to hear from those who have come to the clinics or have had surgery that we have given them and their families a new life."

### **Schedule change**

Mercy Ships completed this year's field assignment in mid-November. The next field service will be in Togo from January to June 2012. After that, the *Africa Mercy* will move to a new August to June annual field service schedule, with the first location being Guinea. This will enable the ship to be in dry-dock each July, during the worst of West Africa's rainy season, when the fragile patients are physically at their most vulnerable.

This is a win-win for Kiwis volunteers, as well as patients. So many people have been keen to volunteer during the summer holidays when, previously, the ship was in dry-dock and transitioning to another country. Now, because of this change in schedule, they will be able to. •

• Any nurse with two years' experience can volunteer to work in Mercy Ships diverse international team. If you are interested, please contact Walls at: [sharon.walls@mercyships.org](mailto:sharon.walls@mercyships.org).

**Sharon Walls** is the communications manager for Mercy Ships New Zealand.

# BRINGING CARE TO WEST AFRICA'S POOREST PEOPLE

**M**ercy Ships is a faith-based humanitarian organisation dedicated to bringing "hope and healing to the world's forgotten poor", according to its vision statement.<sup>1</sup> It runs programmes to promote health and well-being by serving the urgent surgical needs of the poor in West Africa's most impoverished nations and empowering developing communities. Founded in 1978, Mercy Ships has provided services in developing nations valued at more than \$NZ 1.1 billion, and affecting around 2.9 million people.<sup>1</sup>

*Africa Mercy* is a 16,000-ton hospital ship, seven stories high, with 70 beds – 65 beds in three wards, three intensive care unit beds and two isolation beds. The hospital has a staff of 191 volunteers, including nurses, surgeons, laboratory, pharmacy, radiology and rehabilitation staff, supply assistants and administrators.

At any one time, 80 nurses and a team of six to eight surgeons are on board providing treatment and surgery. Six surgical specialties are undertaken – general, plastics, paediatric orthopaedics, maxillofacial/otolaryngology, ophthalmic and uro-gynaecological.

Since its establishment by Americans Don and Deyon Stephens, Mercy Ships has:

- Performed more than 56,000 life-changing operations such as cleft lip and palate repair, cataract removal, straightening of crossed eyes, orthopaedic and facial reconstruction.

- Treated more than 520,000 patients in village medical and dental clinics.
- Treated more than 95,800 dental patients, with more than 228,100 dental procedures performed.
- Educated about 29,000 local health care workers who have, in turn, trained multiple thousands in primary health care.
- Trained local medical professionals in modern health care techniques.
- Completed more than 1095 community development projects, focusing on water and sanitation, education, infrastructure development and agriculture.
- Completed more than 563 port visits in 53 developing and 17 developed nations.<sup>1</sup>

Communications manager for Mercy Ships New Zealand Sharon Walls explains that once the organisation has decided on what country it will work in, preliminary work is done with the relevant government a year or more ahead of time. Once a protocol has been signed, a Mercy Ships team begins advance work on location with the local Ministry of Health and other stakeholders. Part of the team's role is to work with the local harbourmaster and sort out the details for the *Africa Mercy* to be in that port for the entire 10 months of the field service. This is most often in the country's largest port because of the size of the ship, its fresh water requirements, availability to a large percentage of the

population, and for accessibility of transport for patients and their families.

"Very disabled and disfigured people travel long distances to get to the ship for surgery. We often work with Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières to have patients flown in from remote locations. It is not unusual for a patient to be carried many miles by a family member because they can't afford transport and can't walk themselves. Some people walk for days to get to a screening," Walls said.

Before the ship arrives in port, a medical team is involved in screening and selecting appropriate patients and then scheduling them for surgery. These assessments take place in remote, inland locations. Once the ship arrives, a three-day screening takes place, with thousands of people being seen. For the 10 months the ship is in port, both remote and dockside screenings, particularly for ophthalmic and dental patients, continues. Sierra Leone has one dentist per million people. Agricultural programmes, HIV/AIDS education, and other health-care related courses are also provided. •

#### Reference

1) Mercy Ships (2010) *Annual Report 2010*. <http://mercyships.org.nz/assets/files/2010%20Annual%20Report.pdf>. Retrieved 21/11/11.

\* Additional reporting by co-editor  
**Teresa O'Connor**

## BRINGING PRIMARY CARE TO PAPUA NEW GUINEA

**O**n the 12th overseas aid trip of her 48-year nursing career, Auckland nurse Joy Millar spent six weeks earlier this year bringing free primary health care to dozens of villages along the Fly River in Papua New Guinea's (PNG) Western Province. Travelling by yacht, Millar diagnosed and treated villagers, with malaria, worms and tuberculosis (Tb) the most common diseases. The treatment of those with Tb was the responsibility of the Tb controllers. "They get the treatment started and ensure people see it through. Those with Tb are kept under very close scrutiny," she said. Community health workers act as interpreters for the health professionals, who work in a voluntary capacity. Suturing wounds, treating ruptured eardrums, providing antibiotics, plastering a broken arm and delivering her first baby in 43 years, were other aspects of her work.

On the first three-week outreach, Millar was one of 43 health professionals, including five nurses. They travelled the river on board *Pacific Link*, under the auspices of the aid organisation Marine Reach Ministries. During the three weeks, 817 primary health care patients were seen and 199 children were immunised. The two dentists treated 277 patients and the optometry teams saw 186 patients. On the second three-week trip, down the other side of the river, Millar was the only New Zealand nurse on board. She was in PNG from mid-July to mid-September.

She returns to PNG every two years and after each trip, visits a family she befriended during her first trip to the country, following the disastrous 1998 tsunami. During that trip with World Vision, Millar worked as an orthopaedic nurse, along with another nurse and an orthopaedic surgeon.

Between overseas missions, she works as a casual nurse at White Cross accident and medical clinics. •



Joy Millar with the little girl whose arm she plastered.

PHOTO: MARINE REACH MINISTRIES