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EDUCATING NURSES IN RESOURCE-POOR AREAS

By Jai Defranciscis

Jai Defranciscis is an Australian nurse with a passion for paediatrics and education in resource-poor settings. Last year she joined the international medical aid organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) – also known as Doctors Without Borders – heading to South Sudan for a year, working with refugees fleeing fighting between armed groups. This is her account.

When I accepted the position of 'Training Nurse' with Médecins Sans Frontières in South Sudan I braced myself for the worst, and hoped for the best. It was my first time working for a humanitarian organisation and my first time in South Sudan, so everything was very new.

But from the moment I arrived I was overwhelmed both by the national staff's hunger for education, and how much of an education I would receive myself. The MSF project was in a remote area of South Sudan close to the Sudan border. Refugees had been streaming across this border since 2011 when conflict erupted between the Khartoum government (Sudan) and rebels in the south (South Sudan).

The area had a rugged beauty which I quickly fell in love with, but conditions were harsh. I had the luxury of my own tent and a dugout latrine, but for the 70,000 or so refugees in the overcrowded camp of Yida, simply getting enough food and water to survive each day was a struggle.

There was no infrastructure and the only healthcare available was provided by a handful of aid

organisations. Our team of 220 national staff and 10 international staff (MSF 2015) ran inpatient therapeutic feeding, a paediatric ward, a neonatal ward, a TB-HIV ward and an adult general ward. Medical aid was also extended to even more remote locations affected by conflict in the surrounding areas.

I had never worked in a place like this. Children were being admitted with preventable diseases such as measles, tetanus and polio. There were diseases that were new to me such as kala azar. And there were conditions that were difficult to fathom: people coming in with war wounds that hadn't been treated for years simply because there was no one to treat them.

Given the circumstances, it would be easy to assume that the work might be demoralising or disheartening but my experience was the exact opposite, thanks to the endless optimism and strength of our national team and their fierce determination to learn.

From the outset my personal goal was to empower the nursing staff and develop their knowledge and skills

so that they could be autonomous. All of our national nursing staff were refugees themselves who fled Sudan for their lives, and some only had a primary school education, so I had expected the training to be limited to the absolute basics. But I was amazed at how quickly they absorbed all the information – delivered in a language that wasn't their own – and the speed with which they put it into action. In fact, the greatest challenge I found was in keeping up with their demands for information.

My approach was to be as hands-on as possible, holding theoretical teaching sessions to complement and build on the practical, on-the-job training I provided. MSF works with 'medical tool kits' – a collection of protocols, guidelines and policies that address every disease and every condition and which ensure we maintain the highest medical standards even in such resource poor settings. These became my bible. My background experience in paediatrics also proved to be invaluable.

I loved the hands-on approach to teaching and would revise with the nurses a specific technique, skill or procedure and then give them the opportunity to practise it themselves with my supervision. On any given day you could find me either in the hospital working directly with the staff or in my "classroom" teaching the corresponding theoretical lessons. There was never a dull moment.

And as crazy as it seems, it was fun. Our national team's zest for life was infectious and they taught me so much – both professionally and personally. I can't really put it into words; all I can do is say that I feel humbled and honoured to have been a part of this. And I look forward to going back.

My appreciation for nursing education is now on a whole new level. Organisations such as MSF won't be there forever, but – hopefully – the legacy of their investment in national staff training will.

Médecins Sans Frontières Australia (MSF) is looking for neonatal and paediatric nurses to help deliver medical assistance to the people who need it most. You must be able to commit to a minimum of six to nine months and be a resident of Australia or New Zealand. Find out more on the MSF Australia website. www.msf.org.au

JAI DEFRANCISCIS (L)
IN SOUTH SUDAN



Reference

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). 2015. MSF employed more than 2,937 South Sudanese staff and 329 international staff to respond to a wide range of medical emergencies and provide free and high quality healthcare to people in need through 18 projects. Final 2016 figures not available

Jai Defranciscis is a Nursing Activity Manager at Médecins Sans Frontiers Australia

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