The access and quality agenda in the slums of India

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UK

When I heard that 6,000 children die every day in India, my first response was WHAT! WHY? Isn’t India an emerging economy? Growing up in sub-Saharan Africa (Zambia) I had seen poverty, but I had never appreciated that India had 20 times the population of the UK and 100 times the population of Zambia: one billion in Africa—47 governments, 1.2 billion in India—one government, not easy.

When I was approached in the UK Channel 4 series, ‘Secret Millionaire’ I felt compelled to say yes. I meet dentists and doctors from the Asian subcontinent every day, and we often wonder how many of us owe their success to our brave ancestors who migrated in search of a better life and to the opportunities that Britain offered us. I also meet many dentists and doctors who are not from the Asian subcontinent, who want to give time and love to those less fortunate in Africa and Asia, for example through Bridge2Aid.

Some really bizarre thoughts went through my mind when I first arrived in Dhavari, the largest slum in South-east Asia. It houses 1.2 million people in 1 square mile; in fact 60 per cent of Mumbai’s residents live on 6 per cent of Mumbai’s land. I wanted to pick some of those helpless children up and cuddle them—but what were their local child protection policies? I wanted to pull them away from the flying glass in the recycling areas—where was their health and safety policy, let alone risk assessments and safety glasses?

It got worse. The dumping ground was a cesspit, swarming with flies, sewage, animals and people. Not much infection control going on here; HTM 01-05 wouldn’t get a look in. Slips and trips policy? Well in a nutshell: try not to slip or trip when the bulldozers come to the dump to make space for more garbage, or you will get hurt.

We in the UK are just waking up to the fact that one year, is a challenging timeframe for us to meet the standards of the Care Quality Commission. What would happen if the Care Quality Commission came to the slums?

The experience changed my life. I sat in a comfortable space back home in London—I understood that Britain offered us. I also appreciate that India should have fed its poor before it developed its space programme? What can India do to help its poor unless it creates riches with which to help them? I did not teach my kids to write the ABC before numbers, and I certainly won’t be waiting for registration with the Care Quality Commission before I register with the Charities Commission. I have learnt not to judge what I see in India, but to accept it as it is, with its multiple social and commercial facets, and many canny business imagination.

India is cited as one of the BRIC economies by Goldman Sachs, and Indians are democratically proud and work hard for what they have. However, it requires foreign investment, an influx of wealth, and a speedier pace of development to help its people. Go India! You are so much poorer than the UK, and come home feeling good.

Contact Info

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